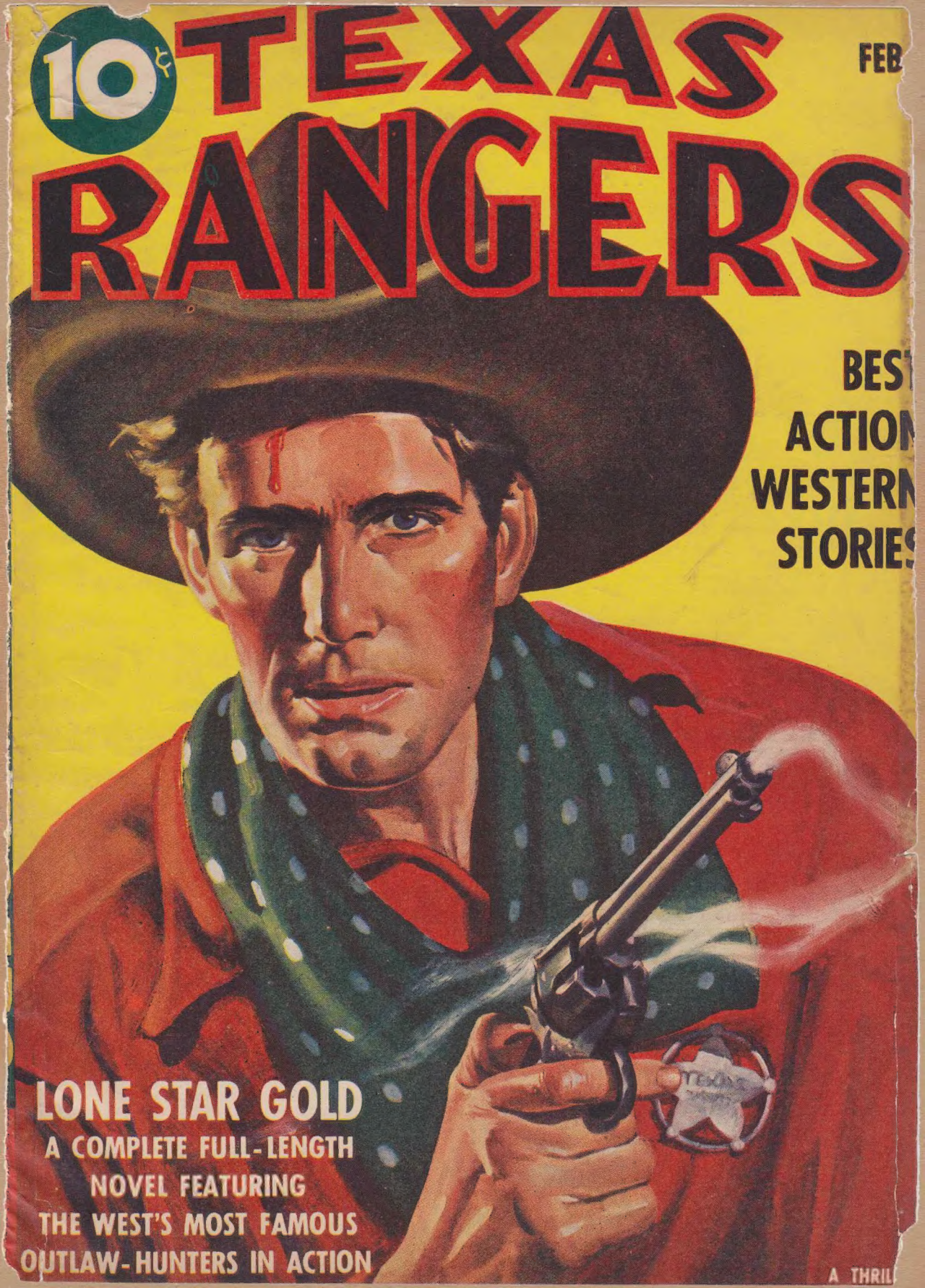
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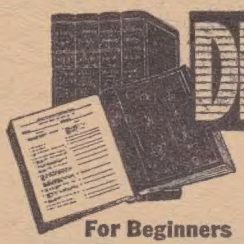

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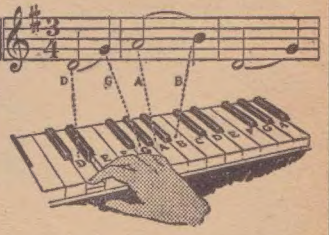

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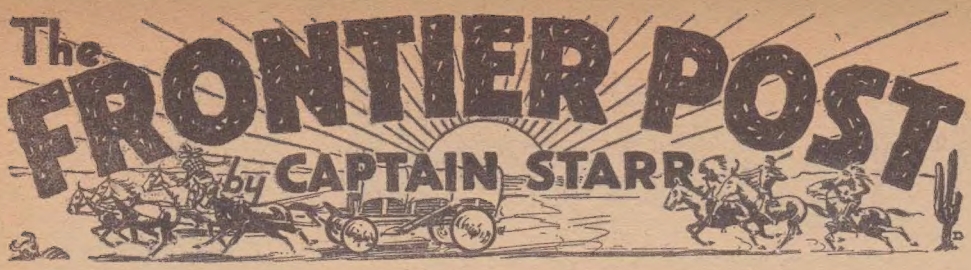

HIYA, gals and galluses! Sometimes I get a heap o' satisfaction in realizing, in this world o' swift scientific changes and mechanical marvels, that there's one thing that's remained unchanged and practically unchangeable since our War Between the States, 80 years back.

That thing is the cavalry saddle. All saddles, for that matter. Cows have changed in shape and heft since the times of the Texas longhorns. But hosses, they come in the same models as when Ranger Jim Hatfield rode. Thusly, their fittin's and regalia stay in the same pattern, and don't ever go out of style.

The smell of a saddle shop is something you don't ever forget. That smell is the same, I reckon, from the Siberian steppes to bedouin sands, and from the Argentina chaco to our own West. It's a lusty, husky smell o' tanned leather, hot glue and wood whittlin's and neatsfoot oil.

Leather Squeaks

There's sounds about a saddle, when a horse is wearin' it, that us old-timers don't ever forget. Good leather squeaks. Good saddles talk, though it's been many a year since they took the squeak out of a new pair o' bootsoles.

There's other homely, plaintive sounds out o' the past that we sometimes long for. You country gals and galluses savvy some o' them. They're the rattle o' loose wagon-spokes, the jingle-jangle o' tug chains, the clop-clop o' hoofs on a smooth, hard road, the plink-plunk of hoss shoes under water when you cross a stony ford, the plick-plock of hoofs on a wooden bridge, and the bawling of a moving herd.

You come onto those sounds ridin' the Rio today, same as when the Rangers was in their glory. And on the range you come on the same critters, and the names for them in border lingo are the same as in frontier times.

Birds and Animals Quiz

So mebbe in our GET FRONTIER POSTED quiz at this settin', we better have an a-b-c workout on common animals and birds, domestic and wild. The rules are plum simple—same as the rules you Ranger Clubbers went by in this here Frontier Post game before. Dig up a lead pencil, mark your guess, then rip through to the right answers listed at the end. Ten out of twelve right answers, mighty fine. Eight, good. Half right, tolerable. Less than half, that means you skipped some of our stories in the past and better not miss future issues.

Let's git started, folks. It's lots of fun and it's a right painless way to study border lingo.

1.—AGUILA is
a hoot owl
b bat
c eagle

2.—BURO is
a donkey
b deer
c rabbit

3.—CONEJO is
a pine squirrel
b fox
c rabbit

4.—CABALLO is
a horse
b cow
c hop frog

5.—GATO is
a dog
b cat
c fish

6.—CULEBRA is
a duck
b calf
c snake

7.—POLLO is
a chicken
b lamb
c parrot

8.—PERO is
a chipmunk
b dog
c dove

Don't mark 'em off too fast, gals and galluses. Better go back and check over the ones you've answered. Think over Numbers Two and Three—they're easy to miss.

9.—PAJARO is
a parrot
b panther
c bird

Now, if you ever studied Latin or Astronomy, this next one should be plumb easy.

10.—PESCADO is
a fish
b goat
c bear

Just two more critters left. Here's a hint—it ain't by no means uncommon to see 'em together in a bad year, when the sandies blow and the creeks dry up.

11.—VACA is
a cow
b snipe
c pig

12.—ZAPILOTE is
a turtle
b horned toad
c buzzard

Wish we had time for more'n twelve. But get these straightened out and the

(Continued on page 12)

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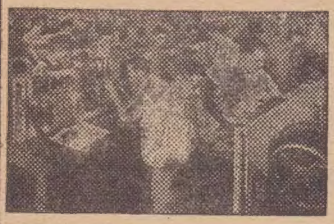
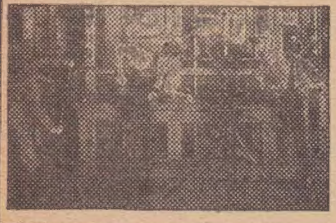


THESE PICTURES SHOW BUT A SMALL PART OF COYNE SHOPS. MY BIG FREE BOOK SHOWS DOZENS OF OTHER VIEWS OF STUDENTS "LEARNING BY DOING"



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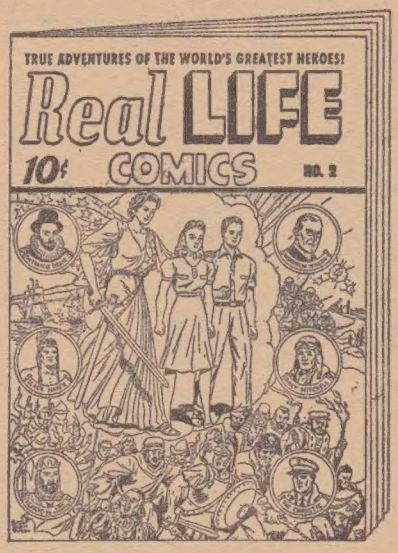

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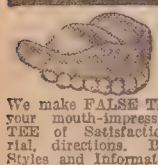

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(Continued from page 8)

rest'll come easy. It's like learnin' your multiplication tables—it's the start that gives you a headache, till things get greased and rollin'.

Makes me think of Pop Talbot, who taught his young ones how to multiply by settin' to work layin' a stone wall. The way to find out what six times seven made was to lay six rows o' seven stones, then count. Nine times ten was nine rows o' ten stones ond so on.

The only trouble was, by the time the oldest boy got big enough to lay out a problem of twelve times fifteen, he was strong enough to wallop the old man and balk at going to school, and make it stick. That boy could tell you what thirteen times fourteen was but he grew up not knowin' how to spell cat.

A Lawyer as a Cow-Nurse

But there's lots of folks smart at one thing and pretty dull at others. One o' the brainiest lawyers in Dallas bought himself a dairy and they tell as how he tried to fit milk bottle caps on his cows.

He thought a cream separator was a thing you put a cow in to separate it from its cream. A traveling salesman sold him six dozen spike tooth drag harrows to put on his barn roof as a lightning trap. He figured that the ring in a bull's nose meant it was married.

First time he went to milk he tried to get the cow to set on the milkin' stool. He bought a half-ton of silo seed from a neighbor, who laughed hisself sick—until he found out that the guarantee the lawyer hombre had him sign had a trick clause that said if the seed didn't grow the neighbor would eat it. The "silo seed" was fertilizer.

ANSWERS

Well, I reckon we're about due to see how we came out in the a-b-c's. You started your GET FRONTIER POSTED scrapbook yet? Better start clippin' 'em out and pastin' 'em up for future reference—and a game to amuse your friends.

1. AGUILA. c is correct. In case you're real anxious to know, bat is **murcielego**, and hoot owl is **tecolote.** So you see this first word wasn't such a hard one after all. EAGLE it is, folks, and the only hard thing about sayin' **aguila** in border lingo is that the g, when it precedes u, takes the sound of h. She goes thusly: Ah-whee-lah.

2. BURO. b is correct. Surprised? Well, **burro** is donkey, but one-r **buro** is deer. The species called mule deer, to be exact.

3. CONEJO. c is correct. Cottontail RABBIT, that is. Should o' been easy if you'd remembered that coney is the name for rabbit in some parts o' the country. Coney Island was so-named, they tell me, because rabbits were so numerous thereabouts. J is like H, same as g before u. So the word is co-nay-ho.

4. CABALLO. a is correct. And a caballero is a horseman.

5. GATO. b is correct.

6. CULEBRA. c is correct. And part of

(Continued on page 112)

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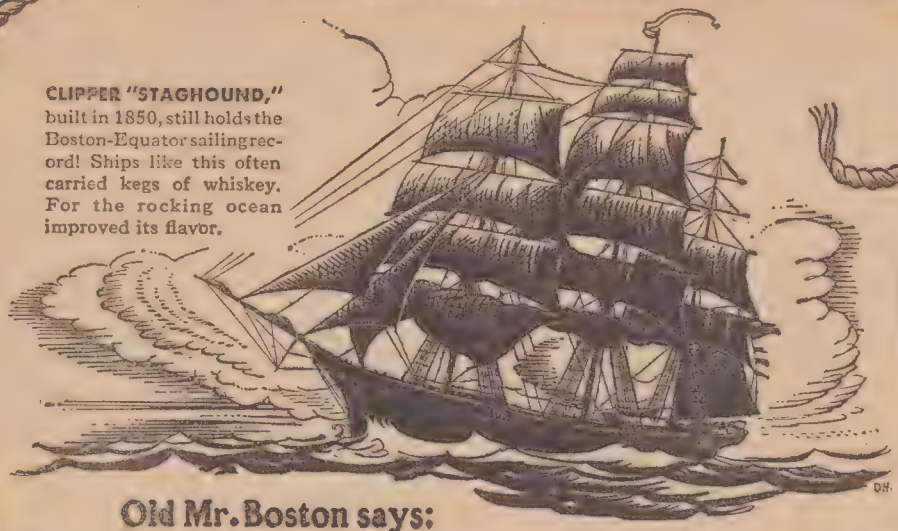

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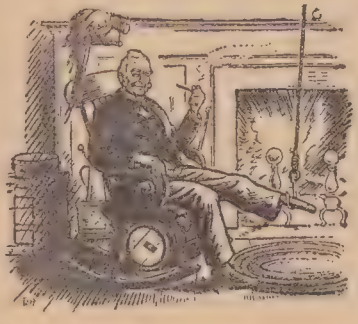

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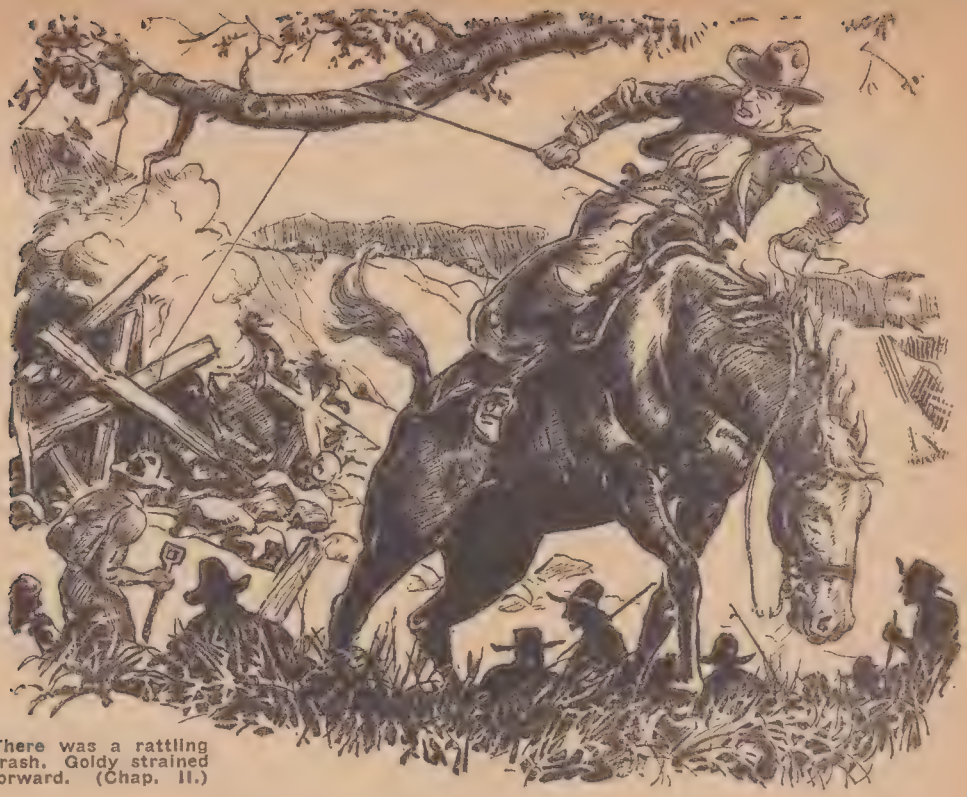

There was a rattling crash. Goldy strained forward. (Chap. II.)

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CHAPTER I

Drums of Death

MOONLIGHT like molten silver bathed the Phantom Mountains in ghostly radiance. Crouched with their rugged backs to the ashen band of hurrying water that is the Rio Grande, the mouths of their canyons were as glowering eye-sockets under beetling brows.

Northward they seemed to stare, those hollow eyes, northward across the desolation of the Big Bend country, northward toward the broad sweep

FEATURING RANGER JIM HATFIELD

of the Staked Plains. Grim sentinels of the wastelands, they stood watch on the Last Frontier, frowning down on the wild range that never had been and never will be disturbed by the plow.

Here ranching is supreme. Here, too, roam the deer, the javelin, the panther and the bear. Here grow the greasewood, coarse chino grass, dagger and thorned brush. Here are gloomy caves upon whose walls are painted weird pictures of an age immemorial, whose grim story only the tight-lipped *Indios* of the mountains can decipher.

Here are whispered strange legends. Here live stranger men. Here Death walks among the shadows, his bony jaws agape with anticipation. To the east flows the Pecos, "west of which there is no law." To the west is the desert, burning sand and alkali and salt.

In the moonlight the Phantoms crouched and listened —listened to the mutter of drums welling from the depths of a great canyon where white water flowed and black shades clustered. Sinister, ominous were those muttering drums. Over and over they seemed to say:

"We will kill you if we can! We will kill you if we can!"

From the west came a high staccato rattle of question. From the east a deep answering roll. The still air throbbed, the moonlight shimmered, the shadows curdled at the bases of the cliffs. And ever the threatening mutter rose and fell, rose and fell:

"We will kill you if we can! We will kill you if we can!"

TO the east of the dark valley where the drums rolled and muttered, a man rode through the moonlight. He was a tall man, much more than six feet, wide of shoulder, narrow of waist and hips.

He wore the colorful but efficient garb of the rangeland with careless grace. Overalls, faded blue shirt, vivid handkerchief looped about a sinewy throat, flaring batwing chaps, scuffed high-heeled boots of soft leather, wide hat peaked as to brim, dimpled as to crown.

Double cartridge belts circled his lean waist, and from carefully worked and oiled cut-out holsters protruded the black butts of heavy guns. They were hung low against the wearer's muscular thighs, those long-barreled guns, with the handles flaring away from his sides and ready to the slim, bronzed hands that never seemed far away from them.

A shaft of moonlight etched the man's deeply bronzed face in silver, throwing strongly into relief the lean cheeks, high-bridged prominent nose, and rather wide mouth that was firm and hard-set. But there was a humorous quirking at the corners that somewhat relieved the grimness of the square chin below.

His eyes, even in the moonlight, showed a peculiar shade of green. They were level eyes beneath level black brows, rather long in shape, fringed by thick black lashes. The hair that showed where the hat brim was pushed back from the broad forehead was black and crisp.

The horse the man bestrode was as noteworthy as his rider. More than seventeen hands high, with a barrel and haunches which bespoke tremendous strength, he fined down to exquisite lines in neck and chest and shoulder.

In color he was a glorious golden sorrel, with mane and tail of deepest black. His eyes were large and liquid, with a flash in them that bespoke a spirit equal to his strength. His hoofs were glossy black, clean-cut as the back of a razor.

There were lines of fatigue in the man's face. The coat of the sorrel was powdered with dust, darkly streaked with dried sweat. But both horse and rider were alert, vigorous, and showed little outward sign of having been on the trail almost continuously for the better part of three days and as many nights.

The moon drifted down the long slant of the western sky, turned from silver to brass, to glowing bronze, to

smoldering red-gold. The battlemented crests of the Phantoms were lit with lurid fires and their mighty breasts swathed themselves in robes of royal purple edged with deepest black. Shadowy and unreal appeared those sombre mountains, shouldering against the sky, pushing back the stars, and yawning a grim grave mouth to receive the dying moon.

Small wonder that the followers of Cabeza de Vaca, in the days when Spain had been mighty and Texas a land of mystery and the unknown, had stared askance at the grim crags and pinnacles that loomed ominously before their startled eyes. And they had muttered between bearded lips: *"Chisos!"*. Phantom—unreal.

JIM HATFIELD

STILL the rider of the golden horse rode westward, following a trail that swung dizzily between two eternities, plotting his course by the great wheeling map of the sky. Suddenly he raised his head, listening.

The horse heard it, too, that eerie whispering which drifted from out the black dark. He pricked up nervous ears.

"Drums!" muttered the rider. "Again! Long way off, but no mistaking 'em. Talkin' drums!"

Intently he listened, while the horse's irons rang loudly on the stony soil, the wind soughed mournfully through the pass, and the stars turned from gold to silver and from great glowing sparks to gleaming pinpoints of light.

"But *that* isn't drums!" the rider abruptly exclaimed.

One slim hand dropped instinctively to a black gun butt. His lithe figure straightened from its careless lounge, grew tense, alert. The lean, hawk-face tightened to immobility until it seemed hewn from dark granite. The long green eyes narrowed the merest trifle.

Louder grew the swiftly approaching sound, a rhythmic clicking that swelled to a low thunder. The tall rider knew it to be the beat of flying hoofs on the hard trail. There was a frantic note in the sound, as if the

racing horse were fleeing from some pursuing terror. Sheer panic, and wretching fatigue, emphasized in the sudden stumbling falter of the drumming irons, and the instantly increased tempo of the beat.

"If something isn't herding that jigger along, my name ain't Jim Hatfield," the tall rider muttered. "Goldy, let's you and me sorta sidle over and hug the cliff wall till he shows up. It's an almighty long drop to the ground from the lip of this sky-climbin' trail."

THE golden horse snorted agreement and as Hatfield reined him in, he snugged against the cliff, ears pricked, nostrils flaring slightly, great brown eyes staring expectantly toward the bulge in the cliff a score of yards ahead. Around that cliff-bulge the trail swung loosely, dipping slightly toward the rock wall, its far edge ragged and crumbling.

"If he doesn't slow up, he'll go over the edge shore as shootin'!" Hatfield muttered. "Gosh all hemlock! Listen to him come!"

With the abruptness of a bursting shell, things happened. There was a crash of hoofs, a scraping and a screeching as the worn steel of the shoes slipped on the stone, a popping of saddle leather and a jangle of threshing stirrups.

Grotesque, distorted in the moonlight, looming gigantic, a great black horse burst around the bulge. Hatfield had a fantastic glimpse of rolling eyes, flaring red nostrils and foam-flecked, tossing mane.

Too late the maddened animal realized his danger. He tried to swerve, leaning far inward, his straining muscles leaping out in ropes beneath his glossy hide. But his irons slipped on the stone, his feet shot from under him.

He gave one horrible wailing scream and plunged over the crumbling lip of the trail. Down! Down! Toward the reaching fangs of stone a thousand feet below. The crash of the animal's falling body came back to the listener on the trail as the tiniest of sounds.

Jim Hatfield raised a bronzed hand and wiped his suddenly moist brow. The golden horse exhaled his breath in a quivering snort. Then he whinnied plaintively, with ears erect and quivering.

"Yeah, he's gone, feller," Hatfield muttered. "Nothin' left of him but busted bones and sausage meat after that drop. Now what in blazes is this all about? Let's you and me go and see."

He urged the golden horse around the bulge and rode swiftly up the winding track, searching the trail ahead with eyes that missed no detail. That there was danger somewhere ahead, or grim tragedy, Jim Hatfield knew. For although the fleeing horse had worn both bridle and saddle, he had carried no rider.

The trail swerved abruptly, narrowed, edged around a cliff that seemed bent on shouldering it off into space. It straightened and the moonlight slanted misty beams across its surface. They fell on a huddled something a few score feet ahead.

"Hold it, hoss!" Hatfield exclaimed. "This feller must be—"

Crash!

From the huddled form gushed a lance of orange flame. Goldy shied as the bullet screeched past scant inches from his black ear.

In a bewildering ripple of movement, Hatfield was out of the saddle and crouched in the deeper shadow of the cliff, both long guns out and jutting forward. But he held his fire, gambling on the injured man's inability to line a sight.

"Hold it, feller," he called, and instantly shifted his position. "I'm not on the prod against yuh!"

Only a gurgling moan, and a horrible, unintelligible gabble of sound replied. The figure on the trail writhed, stiffened, relaxed, and was strangely still.

Ranger Jim Hatfield had before now seen men lie thus starkly still. Face bleak in the moonlight, he stood up and holstered his guns. Without hesitation or hurry he strode forward and knelt beside the motionless form. He had judged correctly that motion-

less silence. The man was dead.

Hatfield peered closer into the distorted face. The man's mouth was gaping open, and from it still welled a sluggish flow of blood. Hatfield stared, and started back with an exclamation. The mouth was a gruesome empty cavity, blood smeared, horrible.

The dead man's tongue had been torn from his jaws!

A swift examination showed the immediate cause of the man's death. He had been shot through the body, high up over the heart. Only a drop or two of dark blood had welled from the small blue hole in his left breast.

"Internal bleeding," the Ranger deduced. "And he shore couldn't'a come far. Huh! It don't seem he could'a rode at all, the shape he was in. He's been sliced to bits, with small knives, I'd say. Yaqui knives, from the looks of the cuts. But I never heard tell of Yaquis yankin' a man's tongue out. They make it a point to keep him so's he can yell and cry. Hmm! Nice section I'm headin' into!"

He stood up, peering, listening. There was no movement on the moonlit trail ahead, and he could see for nearly half a mile. Nor was there any sound.

Then suddenly there *was* sound—an eerie muttering, a rasping whisper which swelled to a staccato rattle as the wind soughed down the pass. And it seemed to the listener that in the quick beat of the "talking drums" there was a note of fiendish satisfaction and triumph.

With a final deep roll the sound ceased, and only the lonely murmur of the wind threaded the dark blanket of the silence.

CHAPTER II

Perdition's Corral

SPRAWLED in the lap of the Phantoms, not far from the awful gorge which bounds the Big Bend country, the cow and mining town of Coma greeted the sun with a bleary face. The slopes above the gaunt mine buildings were thickly grown with the thorny evergreen trees from which the town derived its name.

The *Escondida* Mine dominated the town. As its name denoted, this old Spanish gold mine had lain "hidden" in the brush for centuries, before its dark mouth had finally been stumbled upon by a wandering prospector. The *Escondida* developed a crumbly gravel which released gold in paying quantities. Thereupon old Mike Shaw, the prospector who had done the stumbling had prospered, and so had Coma.

Coma hadn't been doing so bad as it was. Much of the Big Bend country is bitter desert and wasteland, but not all. There are stretches of fine grazing land, well wooded, abundantly watered. Here, as on the rolling plains farther east, grow needle and wheat grasses. And the curly mesquite which is rich in the distilled spirit of the blazing Texas sun and the sweet rains of the dry country—mesquite that plumps out the ribs of truculent steers and turns staid old horses into friskin' hellions.

On either side of where Coma huddles in the shadow of the towering slopes, the Phantoms send out long granite claws—claws that are like to the outstretched paws of a crouching lion. And, like a sleeping lamb curled within the menacing paws of the lion, a great valley curves west and northwest.

So wide is the valley that from its center, where brawls a turbulent stream, the cliffs on either hand, tall and mighty though they are, grow misty with distance. On cloudy days they veil themselves in swirling mists and vanish altogether, to burst suddenly through the sun-wash like very Phantoms indeed, living up to their name.

On and on, mile upon misty mile, stretches Mescalero Valley, until the grim crags of the Cienagos spire into the western sky at no great distance and the desert halts the fertile country with a bleached and bony hand.

There are ranches in Mescalero Valley, big ranches, and a few little ones. The XT, the C Bar O, the

Bowtie, and the Arrow, among others. Most of them date back to the days before Mexican independence, and some are still owned by proud descendants of the old dons who come from Spain to seek fortune and adventure in what then was this far-flung domain of the Spanish king.

The cattle drives to the east and north have always passed through Coma to reach the markets beyond the Texas border, and later the shipping pens of the railroad. Because of these drives, Coma first came into being, and because of them Coma became a rip-roaring town of the Border.

The Chisos Trail from Mexico also loops past Coma in its shifty crawl to the north. The Chisos likewise did its bit to enliven Coma and make of it a place avoided by the peace-loving and the timid.

Old Mike Shaw and his gold mine merely stepped up the tempo a bit and provided a new flow of hard money. Other gold deposits tapped farther back in the hills also did their part, until Coma, which had formerly growled the note of a snarling bobcat, developed the full-throated roar of a mountain lion on the prod.

THE trail—a fork of the Chisos—to the railroad town, beyond the Phantoms and forty miles to the northeast, clings to the side of the swelling slope in whose shadow Coma lies. It climbs sharply enough to make a herd pant and bawl, and dips over the lofty crest. There it curves close to the "diggin's" of the *Escondida* Mine and tumbles down into the town with a dusty sigh of relief.

With the morning sun burning brightly at his back and still making a hard climb of it up the steep slant of the eastern sky, Ranger Jim Hatfield rode down the curving trail. Far below he could see the huddle and sprawl of Coma, with the gaunt mine buildings still washed in the retreating shadow. As he drew near, he could hear sounds of activity along the slope ahead.

The very mountains seemed to reel and rock as a volcano-blaze hurled back the shadows (CHAPTER XI)

"Looks like they're openin' a new mine tunnel there," he mused, "and havin' to do a heap of shorin' up. Must be pretty crumbly soil there—shattered rock and such."

As he approached still closer to the scene of activity, his dark brows drew together slightly and he shook his black head.

"Those supportin' beams are set at too wide an angle," he muttered. "That's gamblin' on trouble, 'specially if a hard and sudden rain happens to come on."

He eyed the proceedings with the eye of an engineer, rather than of the cow hand his dress proclaimed him to be. For Jim Hatfield did know much of engineering.

Before the tragic death of his father, pursuant to business reversals which had resulted in the loss of the elder Hatfield's prosperous ranch, the son had had better than two years in engineering college. Doubtless, he would have gone on and completed his course had not the murder of his father by wideloopers sent him on the vengeance trail, and thence into the Texas Rangers.

As it happened, Hatfield's predicted "trouble" didn't wait on the rain. Above where the shoring for the new tunnel was taking form, men were busy clearing away the growth and removing boulders, of which there were plenty. The removal of one of the big chunks of rock suddenly started a shifting and sliding of a number of its fellows.

Before Goldy had time to snort his alarm at the abrupt racket, a respectable slide was roaring down the slope. It hit the shoring with a crash.

Instantly there was a wild pandemonium of splintering timbers, thudding rock falls, yells of terror and howls of pain. A huge mushroom of dust billowed up and covered the whole scene of destruction. Before it had settled enough for Hatfield to see what all had happened, there arose from its midst a volley of piercing screams which swiftly died to gabbling moans and gasping whimpers.

"On, Goldy!" Hatfield shouted.

The big sorrel stretched his long neck and fairly raced down the trail. His rider left the saddle while his mount was still in full stride. The golden horse skittered to a snorting halt.

Hatfield ran swiftly to the scene of the accident, forcing his way through a straggle of brush.

THE dust was lifting, and the workmen who had fled the avalanche of earth and rock were scrambling back up the slope, shouting excitedly.

There was good cause for excitement. The inadequate shoring had failed to withstand the blow from above. The too-widely angled supporting beams had skidded and crumpled, and the whole mass had crashed down upon the workmen beneath.

A single glance told Hatfield that the unfortunates who had borne the full brunt of the fall were beyond help, crushed and mangled under tons of stone. But in the fringe of the rubble, pinned by a heavy beam across their chests, were two men whose agonized writhing and gasping moans told they were still alive.

"But they won't be for long," the Ranger muttered. "The rock on top of that beam is sinkin' it deeper into the earth and increasin' the pressure on them fellers."

Fellow workmen also realized the danger. They swarmed over the huge mound, tearing at the rock and earth with ineffectual hands and equally ineffectual picks and bars. Others tried desperately to lift the beam from the two victims. But the manner in which the timber was jammed against the splintered shoring prevented more than one pair of hands at a time from getting a purchase on the free end. And the weight was far beyond the strength of a single man to lift.

All this Hatfield realized in one swift glance. He whistled shrilly, a piercing, urgent note. Instantly there was a crashing in the growth and a moment later the great sorrel horse slid to a halt beside his master.

Hatfield's lariat was looped over

the saddle-horn. He grasped it, slipped the noosed end over the end of the beam, and glanced about.

A little distance down the slope, and slightly to one side, was a stout tree. One thick branch protruded parallel to the end of the beam. With a jerk of his wrist, Hatfield sent the free end of the rope spinning over the limb to dangle loosely on the far side. He swung into the saddle.

"All right, you fellers, stand in the clear!" he shouted to the workmen, and sent Goldy down the slope.

He caught the dangling end of the rope as he passed beneath it and took a couple of dallies about the saddle-horn. He steadied the golden horse, checked his tride.

"Take it easy, feller," he cautioned. "Don't snap the twine."

Goldy, who knew perfectly the art of checking a fleeing steer, and turning him a flip-flop if necessary, tightened the rope with just the proper amount of force. The taut line hummed like a harp string. Goldy bunched his feet, resisted with all his mighty strength, and snorted angrily as he was hurled back. He took a little slack, swelled his great chest, and lunged.

There was a rattling crash, the thud of falling rock and earth. Goldy floundered forward a couple of steps. Hatfield instantly checked him and he stood straining against the humming rope.

A CHORUS of triumphant shouts told Hatfield that the victims were hauled free. He eased the sorrel back and loosened his dallies. Then he swung to the ground and walked back, expertly coiling his rope and flipping the noose free from the beam end.

He knelt by the side of the injured men, who lay moaning.

"Some busted ribs, but no lung punctures, so far as I can make out," was his verdict after a swift examination. "Make stretchers outa poles thrust through coat sleeves and carry 'em down to a doctor. Pronto, now! They need attention. And the rest of you fellers had better start gettin' them bodies from under all that mess."

The workers hurried to obey.

"Yuh shore come along in the nick of time, cowboy," declared a brawny individual, wiping the sweat from his face. "And that was shore fast thinkin' on your part." He spoke admiringly. "If it hadn't been for you, we'd never have got poor Pete and Alex out in time."

Hatfield nodded, and was about to reply, when a rousing commotion on the far side of the mound of rubble denoted another act in the drama.

"Get out—get out!" a high, tremulous, but singularly fierce and compelling voice was shouting: "Yuh're fired, I tell yuh! Get out! When I put a man to bossin' a job, I want him to be able to boss it, not make a hash of it. Yuh're one poor excuse for a mine foreman, you are! Look what yuh've went and done! Get out!"

Hatfield strode around the splintered shoring and beheld a little old man with flaring whiskers. The fellow couldn't weigh over a hundred pounds soaking wet. A wizened figure of wrath, he faced a big-shouldered man with a sullen, mutinous face who glared at him angrily.

As Hatfield approached, the big man took a menacing stride toward the little fellow. But the oldster sturdily held his place.

"Get out!" he repeated.

"I waren't to blame," rumbled the big man. "Them fellers up above loosened that stuff and sent it down on top of us."

"And the way yuh built that shorin', a coupla rocks squashed it flat!" raged the little old man. "Yuh went and murdered three good men! Mebbe five!"

At this indictment, the big man gave a bellow of anger. He swung at the oldster with a fist like a sunburnt ham. The blow, had it landed, might well have broken the little man's neck.

But it didn't land. Fingers like slim rods of nickel steel, clamped on the hairy wrist, deflected the blow and swung the big man half around to face Jim Hatfield.

"He ain't half yore size," the Ranger protested mildly, "and he's nigh onto forty years older."

The big man roared again.

"Yuh coyote!" he howled, and lunged fiercely at the Ranger.

CHAPTER III

A Job to His Hand

BEFORE the blow intended for Hatfield had traveled six inches it was blocked. And as Hatfield let go his assailant's wrist, he did so with a wrench that sent the big man reeling back.

"Take it easy," the Ranger cautioned in the same deceptively mild drawl. "Take it easy, feller. I'm not on the prod against yuh."

But the big man was beside himself now. Bellowing curses, he rushed, both thick arms flailing. Hatfield sighed resignedly, weaved aside and hit him with a fist that was like to the slim, steely face of a sledge-hammer.

The big man sailed through the air as if he had taken unto himself wings, hit the ground with a thud, and stayed there. Hatfield turned his glance on the little man with the whiskers.

"Good work, son," the oldster applauded. "Thank-e! But I'd a handled him," he added truculently, glaring at the fallen man, who was groaning with returning consciousness. "The blasted lobo! Will yuh look at the mess he made of that job! What yuh think of that!"

Hatfield ran his eyes up the scarred slope.

"I think," he said quietly, "that yuh better give him his job back when he comes to."

"What's that?" bawled the old-timer. "What's that? Why—"

"You handed an engineer's chore to a drift boss, the way I see it," Hatfield sharply interrupted the tirade. "Did *you* figger the way that slope would act when yuh started work on it?"

"Nope, I didn't," the little man admitted most reluctantly. "But—"

"The angle of his support beams was too wide," Hatfield interrupted a second time. "They were just about right for ordinary conditions, but conditions here ain't ordinary. Nope, I wouldn't blame that jigger too much, if I was you."

The oldster glared at the big foreman, who was sitting up, rubbing his swollen jaw.

"Do yuh hear that, Harper?" he barked. "This over-long hellion says I didn't have no business firin' yuh for a mistake I made my own self!"

The big man scowled from one to the other and seemed about to make an angry reply. But before he could speak, Jim Hatfield smiled down at him from his great height, his teeth flashing white and even in his bronzed face, and his green eyes sunny as summer seas.

That smile abruptly transformed his stern face into something wonderfully pleasant. In spite of himself, the big man grinned reply. He leaped lightly to his feet and, somewhat sheepishly, held out his hand.

"Reckon I went off sorta half-cocked," he admitted. "Glad yuh kept me from doin' somethin' I'd been plumb ashamed of afterward." He felt of his jaw and his grin widened. "Feller, yuh're good," he said admiringly. "I ain't been hit so hard since my mother-in-law left me to run off with a sheepherder!"

Hatfield took the proffered hand in a firm grip.

"All right—all right!" barked the irascible oldster. "Stop foolin' around and get on the job, Harper. Get them bodies out."

"Okay, Uncle Mike," rumbled the mine foreman as he turned to the mass of debris.

THE OLD man was regarding Hatfield with a truculent eye.

"Just how would *you* go about drivin' that tunnel?" he demanded.

Hatfield eyed the gravelly slope for a moment.

"I wouldn't," he replied briefly.

The old man seemed on the verge of another explosion, but managed to

restrain himself with evident effort.

"Then how in all eternal get-out would you *get* the gravel out?" he demanded. "It's down deep that there's gold in payin' quantities."

Hatfield turned and thoughtfully gazed across the slope to where, less than a quarter of a mile distant, the feathery plume of a high waterfall showed white against the dark mouth of a canyon.

"I'd use that water over there to get the gravel out," he said.

At this remark, the intermittent geyser of Uncle Mike's wrath spouted up again with scalding steam, brimstone and blue flame. Hatfield waited patiently for the exhibition to cease, which it finally did when Uncle Mike ran out of breath. Then he proceeded to elucidate.

"The floor of that canyon is considerably higher than most of this gravel slope," he told Uncle Mike, "and that stream runs mighty swift. Because of that yuh could get a good pressure over here without havin' to resort to compressors or pumps. Didn't yuh ever hear of hydraulic minin'?"

Uncle Mike profanely admitted he had "heard somethin' about some newfangled contraption," but opined he "didn't believe the tarnally blasted gimmick would work."

"It's not particular new, and it works," Hatfield told him. "A gravel drift like this is made to order for hydraulics. It's a sight cheaper method than tunnelin' and shorin'. Yeah, I know the old Spaniards tunneled and shored through gravel drifts, but they didn't have any choice. They didn't know anything about hydraulic mining. It hadn't been invented in their day. Here yuh could set up 'giants' with nozzles that give yuh an eight-inch stream of water and knock that gravel down easy. The cost would be nothin' compared to what tunnelin' and shorin' would be."

"Shorin' is danged expensive," Uncle Mike admitted. "That's one of the reasons I'm givin' over my old *Escondida* Mine across there to the south for these new diggin's, once I get 'em operatin'. Plenty of good dirt in the lower *Escondida* levels, but it's costin' too danged much to get it out. I was lucky to file over here, too, when I hit on that old lost mine. It's the same gravel belt, but there ain't no surface indications of gold and nobody ever figgered it was worth a hoot."

He pondered for a moment, then suddenly fixed Hatfield with his shrewd old eyes.

"Supposin' I decide to put in them contraptions—will you take hold and get 'em set up and started op'ratin'?" he demanded. "Kinda looks like yuh know what yuh're gabbin' 'bout."

HATFIELD did not reply at once. The concentration furrow between his black brows deepened, a sure sign that the man a stern old lieutenant of Rangers had named "Lone Wolf" was doing some hard thinking.

"I was sorta figgerin' on tryin' to

[*Turn page*]

drop my twine on a job of ridin' somewheres up the valley," he remarked at length.

"I'll pay yuh a sight more'n them cattle fellers'll pay yuh to chase bulls," Uncle Mike shot at him.

"Tell yuh what," Hatfield replied. "I got a little chore down to the sheriff's office—Coma is the county seat, ain't it—and after that I'll think the thing over and give yuh an answer after I tie onto a little shut-eye. I'm so sleepy right now I can't think straight."

"All right," grunted Uncle Mike. "Shaw's my name—Mike Shaw. Drop into the office down to the *Escondida* Buildin' down in town when yuh're a-mind to talk business. By the way, there's a good sleepin' place right across the street from the mine buildin'. Tell 'em I sent you. Ted Harper, the feller yuh gave the lickin' to, and some of the boys sleep there. Stalls right across the street for yore hoss, too."

Hatfield rode the two miles to town and found the sheriff's office without difficulty.

The sheriff was in, seated at a table, glowering at some papers. He was long and lanky, grizzled and moustached, and had a cantankerous look.

A big nickel shield was pinned to his sagging vest and a heavy gun hung at one scrawny hip. He regarded Hatfield with a cold blue eye.

"Well, what do *you* want?" he demanded, with a profane designation as to the region this might be.

"Just dropped in to make a report," Hatfield replied. "There's a dead man in the trail about seventeen miles east of here."

The sheriff's chair jerked back with squeaking legs.

"What's that?" he demanded.

Hatfield repeated his message, and added details. The sheriff swore until he was out of breath.

"Injuns again!" he bellowed. "Them low-down killin' lobos! They're gettin' worse and worse. We're in for a plumb uprisin' here."

"Funny," commented Hatfield. "I thought all the hostiles were cleared outa this neck of the woods fifteen or twenty years back."

"That's what everybody claims to think!" fumed the sheriff. "That's what Bill McDowell said when I writ him askin' for a company of Rangers to come over here and scatter the ornery devils. Said local authority had oughta be able to handle the few Injuns what were left here. Opined it weren't nothin' but a coupla bucks with a snootful of red-eye actin' up! Coupla bucks, humph! As many as fifty of the black-faced sidewinders has been seen ridin' together, and all packin' good guns, too. And most any night yuh can hear the war-drums beatin' back in the hills."

"Black-faced?" Hatfield repeated. "That must mean Apaches or Yaquis. Yuh shore about this, Sheriff?"

"Am I shore!" bellowed the old officer. "Say, who the blue-blowin' blazes do yuh think you are, to come here askin' me if I'm shore?"

HE glared up at the Lone Wolf, but something in the steady gaze of the long green eyes that met his so unwaveringly caused him to shift his own glance. He fumbled with his hands and muttered under his moustache.

"I'm sorta put out, feller," he said apologetically, at length. "Things has been happenin' too fast hereabouts of late, and this news yuh brung in don't help me to feel any better."

He stood up, hitching his gun-belt higher about his lean waist.

"I'll get me a buckboard and a coupla deppities and ride out there," he announced. "You drop into the office late this evenin' to identify the corpse as the one yuh saw, and then we'll have another talk. Yuh figger on hangin' around in this part of the country?"

"Mebbe," Hatfield replied briefly. "I'll be here when yuh get back, anyhow."

He did not mention to Sheriff Dobson that he had read the letter the officer had written to McDowell and had listened to the grim old Ranger captain's comments.

"There's somethin' off-color over

there," Cap Bill had rumbled. "Sheriff Clate Dobson ain't the sort to bawl-beller just to let off wind. Clate ain't over hefty on brains, but he's a good man and honest. Jim, I figger they don't nobody much know you down in that section, so just sashay down and look things over. If it's only a coupla dozen bucks fired up with rattlesnake juice, comb their wool down for 'em and hustle back. If it's somethin' serious, hang on till it's cleaned up."

With which Captain Bill had dismissed the matter, along with his troop lieutenant and ace man, confident that no matter what might develop in that land of blood and desolation, the Big Bend, that the Lone Wolf would prove competent to cope with the situation.

Hatfield found a comfortable stall and a nosebag for Goldy. When the sorrel had been properly cared for, he repaired to a small eating house nearby and stowed away a few helpin's of chuck.

The bunkhouse old Mike Shaw had recommended proved satisfactory and Hatfield went to bed. When he awoke some time after dark, he had decided to accept old Mike Shaw's offer.

"Will give me an excuse for hangin' around here," he mused, "and more chance to wander about on my own than a job of ridin' would."

CHAPTER IV

Death Strikes Again

HATFIELD ate his breakfast and went to Sheriff Clate Dobson's office.

He found great excitement prevailing there. A number of big-boned cattlemen were present, grouped around the body the sheriff had brought in several hours earlier. They eyed Hatfield coldly and he sensed more than a trace of suspicion in their glances as Dobson performed a rapid-fire of introduction. The sheriff's next words enlightened him as to their attitude.

"This feller yuh found," said Dobson, "was Bruce Ralston, one of the biggest spread owners in Mescalero Valley. He'd been missin' several days, but folks figgered he was stayin' over in Welch, the railroad town over east. How'd he come to be out there on the Coma Trail, and ridin' east, is beyond me. Yuh shore he was ridin' east, Hatfield?"

The Ranger nodded. "I tried to figger where he mighta come from," he explained, "but it was night-time and the moon was pretty nigh down, and there's any number of canyons and arroyos openin' onto the trail between here and where I found him. I figgered he come outa one of them canyons, but there was no way of tellin' which one."

"And yuh say yuh run onto him just t'other side Talkin' Water Canyon?" asked Joe Hayes, a hard-faced young man with broad shoulders and abnormally long arms.

"Didn't say," Hatfield replied. "I don't know one canyon from another around these parts. I'm a stranger here."

Hayes grunted something under his breath.

"Too blame many strangers in this country of late," he remarked, with meaning.

"Uh-huh," Hatfield agreed mildly. "Hard to keep an eye on 'em, or to be shore who *they're* keepin' an eye on."

Joe Hayes stared uncertainly, mouthed something unintelligible and appeared at a loss just how to answer the apparently innocent remark. Before he could make up his mind, Henry Lyons, a swarthily handsome man with sombre dark eyes, voiced a protest:

"Yuh're talkin' too confounded much, Hayes," he remarked, a trifle contemptuously. "This kind of gabble don't get us anywhere."

Hayes grumbled under his breath, but subsided. A tall old fellow, Train Beverly, owner of the big XT, took up the conversation.

"This just about touches the limit," he complained. "I'm in favor of organizin' a vigilante committee and

cleanin' them devils out proper."

"Clean out who proper?" barked the sheriff.

"The Injuns," Beverly replied vaguely, and the sheriff snorted his disgust.

"Yuh gotta catch Injuns, or anybody else, 'fore yuh clean 'em out," he declared. "Ain't nobody hit onto any Injun settlement hereabouts. Yeah, I know, reports has come in of bands ridin', but can any of you hostile gents tell me where to tie onto one of them bands? And so far as that goes, they don't nobody know for shore that Injuns is the ones makin' the trouble hereabouts. Some of the things that have happened seem to me to be a mite out of the ordinary in the Injun line of work."

THE hard-faced Hayes suddenly turned to Hatfield.

"Stranger," he growled, "yuh ain't said so, but I'm willin' to bet yuh heard drums in the hills last night."

Hatfield nodded slowly. "I did," he admitted. "Talkin' drums, if I'm not mistaken."

"See!" Hayes exclaimed triumphantly. "Every time somethin' breaks loose, them blasted drums talk! It happened when Warner was killed. They talked when those two XT hands was found pegged out on ant hills, and when the Eight Bar W ranchhouse was burned. Drums every single time! Talkin' drums!"

There was a general nodding of heads. Hatfield's black brows grew together slightly, but he made no comment.

A little later the meeting broke up, the cattlemen going their various ways. Hatfield was left alone with the sheriff. The old officer regarded him with a peculiar expression on his leathery face.

"Feller," he said, "I didn't bring it up 'fore now, 'cause them fellers were in too much of a wranglin' mood to need anythin' else to argufy over, but there's somethin' I want to speak to yuh about. You said Ralston took a shot at yuh 'fore he cashed in. Right? Well, when we found his body, he waren't wearin' no belts, and there waren't a sign of a gun nowheres around!"

Hatfield countered with a question. "What kinda guns did he generally pack?"

The sheriff's grizzled brows drew together.

"Don't see what diff'rence that makes," he growled, "but Bruce always leathered a old Smith and Wesson Russian model, a forty-four. But I tell yuh there waren't no gun on him!"

"Nope, I reckon not," Hatfield agreed. "'Cause"—he reached inside his shirt—"here it is."

With that he laid a short-barreled six-gun on the table.

The sheriff snatched it up, glared at it. "This ain't no Smith forty-four, and this ain't Ralston's gun!" he declared accusingly.

Hatfield nodded agreement to that also.

"I figgered as much from the looks of him," he replied. "I thought it a mite strange for an old-timer, like Ralston showed plain he was, to be packing a new model thirty-two-twenty with a short barrel. That's a shoulder-holster gun, and belt marks showed plain on Ralston's shirt. That's why I brought it along—figgered such an uncommon caliber and model was worth hangin' onto under the circumstances."

"That's right," agreed the sheriff. "But why didn't you hand it to me this mornin'?"

"Wanted to see if there would be any remark about that feller not packing any gun when yuh found him. Yuh see, I figger this Ralston hombre took this gun offa one of the killers that did him in, when he broke 'way from 'em—like he musta done. Yuh know anybody in this section who packs a gun of this caliber? They're mighty uncommon west of the Pecos."

The sheriff shook his head. "But I'll shore try and find out," he declared. "Yuh thunk up somethin' there, feller. Say, yuh got the makin's of a good peace officer, or I'm a heap mistook."

"Yuh didn't go down into the can-

yon and look at Ralston's hoss, did yuh?" Hatfield asked, paying no heed to the compliment. "I was wondering if there is a way into that canyon."

"We didn't go down," the sheriff admitted. "Was gettin' late and it's a big chore. Hafta make a five-mile ride back east to begin with, and then another five miles or so up the canyon, rough goin'. Why?"

"The dead hoss might be wearin' a brand," Hatfield replied. "Not that it would necessarily mean much. Branded hosses are widelooped same as unbranded ones. But then again it might."

"I'll make that trip tomorrer," promised the sheriff. "Now about this gun—"

"Put it in yore safe," Hatfield advised. "I see yuh got a strong-lookin' one on t'other side the room under the window. I'll drop in again tomorrow evenin' in case yuh wanta talk to me again. Right now I gotta little chore to do."

THE sheriff nodded, and Hatfield left him seated before the table, staring at the odd-calibered gun.

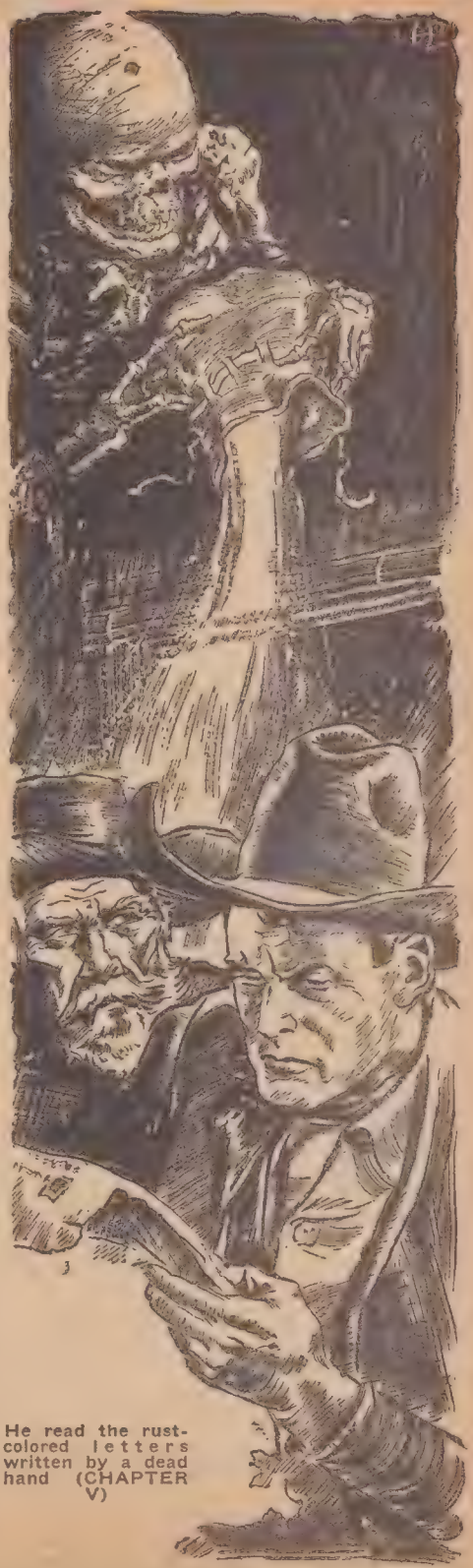
The Ranger walked leisurely along the dimly lighted street, pausing at the corner to roll a cigarette with the slim fingers of his left hand. He had just lighted the brain tablet when he heard, back the way he had come, the sound of a shot, muffled as if the gun had been fired inside a room.

He hesitated a moment, and as he did so, there came to his ears a patter of swift feet dying quickly into the distance.

"Sounded like it was back by the sheriff's office," he muttered. "Mebbe I'd better slide back and take a look-see."

He retraced his steps, paused before the sheriff's office, and glanced through the door, which stood slightly ajar. Sheriff Dobson still sat at the table, facing the open window on the far side of the room, apparently deep in thought.

Hatfield had half turned away, when something unnatural about the way the sheriff's head lolled to one side



He read the rust-colored letters written by a dead hand (CHAPTER V)

gave him pause. He shoved open the door and stepped into the room. A single glance at close range was enough.

The old peace officer was dead, shot through the heart!

Hatfield's gaze flickered across the room.

"Stuck the gun through the window and let him have it," he muttered.

He swept the room with an all-embracing glance. Everything appeared the same as when he had left it but a few minutes before.

No! Not everything! The odd-calibered gun was no longer lying on the table. It was nowhere in sight.

Hatfield peered under the table, and behind the sheriff's chair. The safe was shut and locked and he felt certain that the sheriff had not had time to open it and place the gun inside.

"Nope, it's gone," he concluded. "I've a big hunch that's what Dobson was killed for. The killer wanted that gun—wanted it mighty bad. Must have been hanging around outside that window and listenin' to us talk. Didn't want that gun to stay here, and didn't want Dobson goin' around making inquiries about it."

He turned at a sudden sound outside. Feet pounded on the porch. Young Joe Hayes and Walt Wagner, the fat deputy, stepped through the door. They took in the situation at a glance.

Hayes' hand flickered toward his gun. It froze on the butt, the muscles of his arm bulging with strain, his face darkening with anger.

But he had sense enough to respect the twin black muzzles glowering at him. Jim Hatfield's double draw had been as the flicker of a rattler's fangs in the death stroke. His green eyes, cold as a frozen wave, regarded the pair.

Wagner slowly raised his hands, shoulder high. Hayes, with the greatest care, let go his gun and followed suit.

"Yuh can't get 'way with it, feller!" Wagner quavered. "We'll ketch yuh 'fore yuh make the Border!"

"'Less he aims to do us in, too, 'fore he starts," Hayes said in a voice that denoted he believed that only too probable.

HIS black glare met Hatfield's gaze unflinchingly, however. Wagner's face whitened, and he moistened his lips nervously.

"I don't aim to do anybody in, and I'm not goin' anywhere," Hatfield quietly reassured them. "I'm just aimin' to keep yuh from doin' somethin' yuh'd be sorry about afterwards. Did yuh hear the shot that cashed in the sheriff?"

"I heard it," Wagner admitted. "I was just roundin' the corner below here."

"Me, too," was Hayes' grudging reply. "I was comin' outa the Swallerfork Saloon across the way. What difference does that make?"

"Only this," Hatfield replied. "I'd hardly have had time to clean my guns, would I? Here!"

He flipped the big Colts in his hands and held them out, butts first.

"Look 'em over," he invited.

Lowering his hands, Wagner did so. Hayes leaned over his companion's shoulder and watched.

"Reckon that clears yuh, feller," Wagner admitted, returning the guns. "They shore ain't been shot off recent."

"'Less he used another gun!" Hayes growled suspiciously.

"And swallered it after I used it!" Hatfield interjected, a note of exasperation in his voice. "Suppose yuh look around the office and outside the door and window." He holstered his guns and raised his hands above his head. "And look me over, too," he invited.

Hayes bent a long stare upon him, and shook his head, still grudgingly.

"Reckon yuh didn't have anythin' to do with it," he grunted. "But, feller, yuh shore got a plumb gift for showin' up where bodies happen to be!"

"Speakin' of bodies," put in the deputy, "let's lay pore old Clate on the bunk over there. It gives me the creeps lookin' at him settin' in his chair with his head hangin' sideways."

Hayes and Hatfield assisted the deputy to transfer the body to the couch. They straightened the limbs decently, folded the gnarled hands, and stepped back. Hatfield suddenly pointed to the sheriff's chair.

"There's the bullet that done for him!" he exclaimed. "Passed right through his body and brought up in the chair back!"

"Well, I'll be blowed!" muttered Wagner.

He strode to the chair and tried to loosen the battered bit of lead, without success. Then Hayes tried and likewise failed.

"Hafta get a chisel and pry it loose, I reckon," he growled. "Mebbe I can cut it out with my knife."

"Here, let me have a try," said Hatfield.

He gripped the protruding base of the slug between his thumb and forefinger. The two watchers saw great muscles leap out along his arm like taut ropes. The sleeve of his shirt suddenly split from wrist to elbow—and the bullet came out of the wood!

"Good gosh!" breathed Wagner. "Feller, I'd shore hate to have yore fingers around my windpipe!" He peered at the battered bullet that Hatfield laid upon the table. "What a mite of a slug!" he wondered. "Why, it ain't no bigger around than a buckshot!"

"Easy to see it didn't come outa one of my forty-fives," Hatfield remarked grimly.

"Nor outa any hoglaig I ever see around these diggin's," Wagner declared with conviction. "What caliber is that, anyway?"

Hayes examined the bullet.

"About a thirty-two, I'd say," he offered.

"Yes," Hatfield agreed softly, "or a thirty-two-twenty."

Hayes shot him a quick glance, but made no comment.

"I'll go tell the coroner," Wagner said. "Doc McChesney is shore gettin' plenty business of late. Gents, there's gonna be the devil to pay over this. Old Clate was mighty well liked. Hatfield, we'll want you at the inquest tomorrer. Will be a double inquest, I reckon, and you're sorta star witness to both."

He hesitated a moment, glanced thoughtfully toward the jail cells behind the office, and rubbed his chin. Whatever was in his mind, he evidently decided to refrain from mentioning it or attempting to put it into action.

Hatfield's lips quirked slightly at the corners as he rightly interpreted Wagner's glance, but he only said:

"I'll be there. Now I got a little chore to 'tend to, if yuh're all through with me."

CHAPTER V

With the Substance of My Soul

JIM HATFIELD had no trouble at all in locating the *Escondida* Building and the office of old Mike Shaw.

"Well, yuh shore took yore time gettin' here!" old Mike greeted him cantankerously.

In a few words Hatfield acquainted him with the reason for the delay, and told of the death of the sheriff. He expected the news to elicit another explosion, but instead Shaw sat strangely quiet, staring straight ahead of him.

"Pore old Clate," he said at length. "Pore old Clate." He turned suddenly to face the Ranger. "Hatfield—that's yore name, ain't it?— I got a notion I'm to blame for all this."

The Ranger glanced at him in surprise.

"How yuh figger that?" he asked curiously.

Uncle Mike did not reply at once, and when he did, it was in the form of a question.

"Hatfield," he said slowly, "do yuh believe in cusses?"

The Lone Wolf smiled slightly.

"Well," he replied judiciously, "it depends on who's doin' the cussin'. The way you handed 'em out this mornin' I considered 'em sorta authentic."

Uncle Mike chuckled, despite his evident depression.

"I don't mean that sort," he elaborated, "but the kind a feller puts onto somethin' he don't want anybody else to bother—'specially a feller that knows he's gonna die mighty soon."

Hatfield regarded the old man with greater gravity than before.

"Well," he said, "I consider there's this much to it—if folks know about the curse, mebbe it'll affect 'em. I reckon most everybody is a mite superstitious—some more'n others— and if folks get to thinkin' too much about such things, it turns into just another form of worryin'. And worry always has an effect—usually bad. Does that answer yore question?"

Uncle Mike nodded slowly. "Sorta," he admitted. "I don't figger I ever been over-superstitious, but of late I've sorta had a leanin' that way. First, I've got somethin' to show yuh, then I'll talk some more."

He crossed to a ponderous iron safe, twirled the combination knob, and swung back the massive door. Then he unlocked an inner compartment and rummaged among some papers. Finally he drew forth a yellowed bit of linen upon which was written something in rust-colored, crooked letters—something written by a dead hand.

"You read Spanish?" he asked with a sharp look.

Hatfield nodded.

"Take a glim at this, then," said Uncle Mike. "Here, I'll turn up the lamp so's yuh can see to make it out."

With curiosity which quickened to i n t e n s e interest, Hatfield deciphered the rusty characters that spelled out the quaint Spanish of an earlier day. He read:

I, Fernando de Castro, in the tenth month of the 1810th year from man's salvation, am dying here where the last rays of sunlight reflected from the Devil's Finger fall upon my resting place and upon my lost mine, sealed by the dark men of the mountains who have slain my followers and wounded me to death.

I am rich! Rich beyond my wildest dreams! But to what avail! The treasure is there—there where the red ray falls. It is mine! I have paid for it with the substance of my soul! For it I murdered Enrique de Leon, my friend, to whom the king—may him God and the saints preserve—granted these lands.

That deed haunts me and causes me much disquiet in my secret heart. For the others I do not care, for those who died toiling in the black dark. They are naught, those dark ones, although Father Juan, the priest, avowed that they have souls and in the after life may stand as high as the best blood of Castile. That I believe not. There will be too many dons and other gentlemen in Heaven who know how such things should be managed.

But Enrique de Leon haunts me—he who was my friend. And because of this my sin, I make penitence and send to the good Father Miguel Hidalgo of Guanajuato this message, and with it that which tells the location of the treasure and the mine.

I have one servitor left—he who hid me, wounded, from the wrath of the dark men of the mountains. He is small of wit but powerful of body. Perhaps he can win through to the good priest with this my offering to Holy Church, whereupon prayers may be offered up for my soul.

But I misdoubt me. To those who sit at the table of Death comes vision. Aye, I fear me that through the years without end the wealth shall lie hidden, and the mine will remain indeed *La Mina Escondida*. If so, may a murderer's curse lie upon him who rolls away the stone!

Hatfield looked up from the strange document, to find old Mike Shaw's eyes fixed upon him.

"And," said old Mike heavily, "I was the feller who 'rolled away the stone!' "

For some minutes there was silence. Then old Mike spoke again.

"Yeah, I found it," he said in emotionless tones. "I got hold of this thing from an ignorant old Mexican I helped outa trouble. He give it to me jest 'fore he cashed in, and I figgered out the hidden catch in it. It's almighty plain once yuh get onto it."

"How's that?" Hatfield asked.

OLD Mike placed a horny finger on the words "Devil's Finger."

"That's it," he explained. "For years there's been the story goin' around that an old Spanish mine was hidden hereabouts, and lots of folks tried to locate it. I figgered it was just another one of them yarns until I got hold of this thing. I knowed the country hereabouts, and I'd heard tell

of the Devil's Finger—that big jut of rock up top the slope here.

"Well, when the sun is jest goin' down, late in the fall, it reflects from the side of the rock—it's granite polished by sand and wind—and the light falls down the slope here after the sun 'pears to have set. It's just a narrer beam of light, and it only shows toward the end of the year.

"I was scratchin' around here last October and I see it, and all of a sudden the meanin' of them words come to me. I follered the beam up the slope, found where the rock and earth was all heaped up sorta unnatural under the brush—and I uncovered *La Escondida*.

"But that old Jigger musta been sorta loco just 'fore he died. There ain't no treasure here like he talked about. A good claim, yes. I'm gettin' moderately well off from it, but that's all. Reckon he sorta sized it too high. Funny the priests never come lookin' for it."

"I don't figger that's over-hard to explain," Hatfield put in. "That half-witted servant he speaks of was told to go to Father Miguel Hidalgo in Guanajuato, and that was in October of Eighteen-ten. Well, Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla of Guanajuato, a priest, was the leader of the first real Mexican revolution, when all this section was the province of New Spain.

"He was captured and executed in Eighteen-eleven, the very next year. So of course the servant of old de Castro never got to him. Chances are the servant feller hung onto the writing—superstitious about it, no doubt, and it was handed down through his family . . . But what 'bout the curse?"

"Well," said Uncle Mike heavily, "it was right after I opened up *Escondida* that things started happenin' around here. There's folks who say that the Injuns in the mountains down below the Border know their ancestors killed the Spaniards, and closed the mine 'cause of the way the Spaniards made slaves of 'em and made 'em work theirselves to death in the mine.

"They say that the Injuns are mad 'cause the mine was opened agin' and aim to run everybody out and close it agin so's nobody will ever find it. That's one of the reasons I made up my mind to start that new works over near the trail. I figgered that might cause 'em to ease up a mite."

"And yuh reckon openin' the mine is the reason for such a thing as the killin' of Bruce Ralston and Sheriff Dobson?" Hatfield asked incredulously.

"Dunno," admitted Shaw. "But there's this about it. When I opened up I needed money to develop, so I took in three pardners with me. I hung onto more'n half the stock, and I have the say about everything, but them fellers put money into the thing, and everybody knows it."

"Well?"

"Well, one of them fellers was Bruce Ralston. Another was Clate Dobson."

"And the third?"

"The third—he ain't dead yet. The third is young Joe Hayes."

BEFORE he left the office Hatfield agreed to install the hydraulic machinery for Shaw and start it operating.

"You hustle right over to Welch, the railroad town, tomorrer," directed old Mike. "They got a telegraph there and yuh can send in the order for the machinery by wire. Yuh can ride it faster than the stage makes it . . . The inquest, yuh say? Doc McChesney, the coroner, rode out to the head of the valley to tend a feller who got snakebit. Won't be no inquest for a coupla days. . . ."

Hatfield started at daybreak and rode the forty-odd miles to the railroad town. He put in some busy hours at the telegraph office and satisfactorily arranged for the immediate shipment of the hydraulic mining machinery.

That night, also, Captain McDowell at Ranger Headquarters, received a laconic unsigned telegram which read:

HAVING A REAL NICE TIME!

"Good gosh!" Cap Bill rumbled

grimly. "I didn't figger things was that bad over there!"

It was late in the day when Hatfield concluded his transactions, so he spent the night at the town of Welch.

Early morning found him on the home trail. He was a little less than half way to Coma when he turned aside from the Chisos Trail and entered the narrow mouth of a gloomy canyon that at first trended due south, but later veered until it paralleled the Chisos Trail which clung to the mountain side far above.

The canyon floor was choked with growth, littered with boulders. The south wall was a great slope of shale and boulders and slide-scarred earth which swelled upward at a steep angle to the base of a series of battlemented cliffs that formed the serrated crests of the Phantoms.

"Must be a bad section in winter or early spring," Hatfield mused, eyeing the seamed and gashed slope. "Them gulches mean slides durin' freezin' and meltin' times. I got a notion a gunshot or even a loud word would be enough to start them rocks rollin' at times."

CHAPTER VI

Calamity on the Move

MILE after mile Hatfield made his way up the canyon, his keen eyes missing nothing. To all appearances the gloomy gorge was deserted and always had been, but from time to time Hatfield experienced an eerie feeling that he was being stalked.

Strain his ears as he would, he could catch no sound of horses' irons on the rocks or the rattle of a misplaced stone. Still the feeling persisted, and it seemed to him, too, that Goldy was more nervous than was his wont.

To men who ride throughout the years with deadly danger as a stirrup companion there comes a sixth sense that warns of menace when, apparently, none is present. Hatfield neither saw nor heard anything to substantiate the feeling, but nevertheless it persisted, and the voiceless monitor deep in his brain persistently clamored for attention.

So while apparently Jim Hatfield rode carelessly, lounging in the saddle, idling along through the growth, in reality every sense was at hair-trigger alertness.

Gloomier grew the canyon, as the cliffs on his right towered farther into the sky, and their ragged breasts overhung the gorge floor.

Ahead, swelling from the canyon floor, appeared a tall knoll with sides practically free of growth. Hatfield absently noted that the side fronting the lower canyon was an almost perpendicular cliff, while up-canyon it was a steep rise that flowed upward to the rounded crest.

"Peculiar formation," he mused. "Almost like the salt domes of the oil country. Looks almost like it had been thrown up by human hands—somethin' like the burial pyramids of the Aztecs, covered with earth and grass."

He dismissed the mound from his thoughts upon passing it, however, and concentrated on what had brought him into the canyon in the first place.

"That chimney rock cliff over there had oughta be just about opposite where the hoss went over," he decided, "if I didn't mistake the spot on the way to Welch yesterday. There's the overhang that marks the trail up above . . . Now let's see—four, five hundred yards farther ought to about make it. Shore is shadowy down here since the canyon narrowed just the other side that mound."

He rode on, pushed through a final straggle of brush, and abruptly pulled up. Directly before him lay the carcass of the unfortunate horse that had plunged over the lip of the trail on the night of his arrival.

"Just as I figgered, he's a black," the Ranger muttered. "Gosh, he's squashed like a stepped-on frog! And"—his green eyes narrowed and became coldly gray—"somebody got here 'fore I did!"

That was self-evident. The horse Hatfield had seen plunge over the lip of the cliff trail had worn saddle

and bridle. The mangled body before him bore neither. And a second glance showed a ragged wound where the brand had been cut away!

"Just as I had it figgered out," Hatfield growled. "That pore Bruce Ralston managed somehow to give the devilish killers the slip while he still had some life left in his body. He grabbed a gun off one of 'em and forked a hoss that belonged to one of the gang. Made his getaway, but was plugged doin' it. Rode 'til he fell outa the hull. Scared the cayuse when he dropped, and it run away. Wonder why they didn't follow him?

"Mebbe they did—and he gave them the slip again. Mebbe they heard his gun when he throwed down on me and figgered that meant somebody was comin', and they didn't care to risk meetin' anybody, specially when they had no way of knowin' how many somebodies it might be. Which means, if I'm guessin' right, that whoever they are, they shore don't wanta be spotted.

"And that hardly ties up with the Indian theory. This critter's gear and brand musta meant somethin', too, if they took the trouble to sneak up here and remove both. Question is, how did they know he went over here? They coulda trailed the getaway and found Ralston's body, but there wasn't a thing to show the hoss went over the cliff nearly half a mile farther on.

"Nope, that's out. My guess is that they didn't know about it until Sheriff Dobson brought Ralston's body to town. I reckon the jigger that cashed in Dobson is the one who hightailed here to remove evidence that would tie him up with the killin' of Ralston. Shore wish I knew who all Sheriff Dobson talked to other than the man I met in his office, if anybody else. Mebbe Walt Wagner will know."

Dismounting, Hatfield went over every inch of ground near the dead horse. Suddenly he voiced a low exclamation. Beside a bush, where the earth was soft and moist, he found a foot print.

"And no Indian moccasin ever made that track," he muttered, eyeing the deep and clean-cut indentation of a high, narrow bootheel. "Cowboy boot, that is. About average size. No special nail pattern or anything to mark it out from any other one. Humph! And this *is* a moccasin print!"

Squatting on his heels, he examined a second track discovered near the first, shaking his head over the broad loose scuffing so unlike the mark made by the boot. Carefully he quartered the ground and came to the conclusion that two men had been active around the body of the horse.

"And from all appearances, an Indian and a white man," he decided. "Or at least one of 'em wore boots

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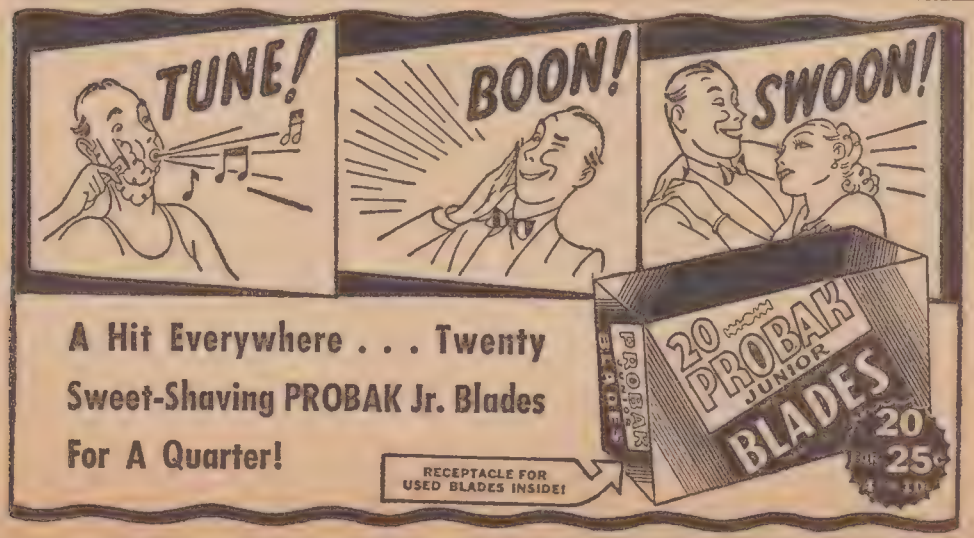

and the other wore moccasins."

He continued his examination, farther down canyon, and unearthed indubitable evidence of the recent presence of two horses.

"Beginning to tie up," he declared. "One hoss shod with regulation irons, the other one on bare hoofs. *That* says white man and Indian, all right."

EXHAUSTIVE search discovered nothing further of interest and the Ranger mounted and rode slowly back down the canyon, more watchful than before. For more and more urgent was the clamor of that unheard voice crying of pressing hidden danger.

Boom!

The sound was like to the discharge of a great gun. It snapped Hatfield's head back, caused Goldy to snort and shy. It was instantly followed by a crackling rattle as of volleying rifle fire.

For a tense moment the Lone Wolf was utterly at a loss to account for the unusual sounds. Then, as his eye ran over the scene, he saw turbulent movement far up the rugged slope to his right. For a bewildered instant he stared, then with a rush came understanding.

The slope was roaring downward toward the canyon floor in a mighty avalanche!

Even as Hatfield stared the advance of the slide struck the canyon floor with a low, thudding thunder. Huge boulders came bounding toward him, flattening the growth, smashing everything in their path to powder.

And this was only the beginning! Behind these deadly outriders, with a slow serpentine movement, came the body of the avalanche.

"On, Goldy!" the Ranger roared, and the great sorrel fled down the canyon with death crashing at his heels.

Almost instantly Hatfield realized that the race was lost before it was begun. For fully a mile ahead the entire slope was now in motion, a mighty mass of earth and stone that would sweep across the canyon floor like the Atlantic over a lost continent.

But on fled the great golden horse, gallantly running his losing race with death. Eyes rolling, mane tossing, nostrils flaring red, he poured his long body over the ground, his flying irons crashing showers of sparks from the stones, foam from gapping jaws flecking his glorious golden coat.

Hatfield steadied him, upheld him, encouraging him to greater efforts with voice and hand. And ever the huge boulders thundered past, missing them by inches, by the breadth of a hair, while smaller stone screamed overhead and crashed against the canyon wall with the force of shots fired from a battleship's guns.

A hurricane of displaced air howled and under all, a base for the wild turmoil, was a horrible crunching and grinding. It was the most sickening sound to which Hatfield had ever listened.

In a level wall, a score of feet and more high, the avalanche came rolling and thundering across the canyon floor. High above the doomed horse and his rider curved the ragged tossing crest, with mighty masses of stone and earth rushing down the concave surface like wreckage on the breast of a wave.

With the roaring destruction less than a hundred yards away, Hatfield suddenly saw a brown swelling mass directly ahead. He let out a yell of renewed hope which spurred the straining horse to a last frenzied effort. With the first broken masses of the avalanche crashing at his very heels, his irons hit the slope of the high knoll which swelled from the canyon floor.

UP HE went, clawing like a cat at the steep rise, gasping, sobbing, striving to distance that awful terror which boomed and thundered in his ears.

The mighty buttress of stone shook and trembled from the force of the blow as the avalanche struck. Up the slope foamed a welter of earth and rock. Over it screeched the flying boulders.

More than halfway to the very crest of the tall hill the frothing rubble piled and folded, sending gushing

forth billows of dust and showers of rock splinters. The broadly foundationed knoll rocked and swayed, as if it would be torn bodily from the granite upon which it was based. It shuddered like a living thing in pain as giant boulders crashed against its sides, tearing away tons of stone which went flying across the narrow canyon to burst in meteor fragments against the adamantine cliffs.

Gradually the turmoil lessened, ceased. A vast cloud of dust swirled and eddied through the canyon. This, too, at length settled. The air cleared, the sunshine filtered through, and the tender blue of the sky arch gazed downward at the destruction wrought.

CHAPTER VII

"Kill You If We Can!"

FOR a full mile and a half the slope was ripped and scarred, denuded of every vestige of growth, scoured clean of boulders and loose rock. Only the glistening naked stone or the raw wound of fresh earth was visible. The canyon floor was buried many feet deep with a tossed and swaled sea of marl.

Hatfield stared, shaking his head, his quick gaze taking in the whole scene at a glance that traveled upward toward the distant line of cliffs which surmounted the slope.

"Now how in blazes did that thing get started?" he muttered. "Seemed to me the first thing I heard was a sound like that of an explosion. Was that a big mass of stone breaking loose from a cliff to start the mess sliding, or was it something else? I wonder if—"

With a lithe movement of bewildering speed he swayed sideward, hurling himself out of the saddle. He struck the earth on hands and knees and was erect in a catlike leap, hand reaching for the butt of the heavy Winchester snugged in the saddle boot.

Cr-rr-rack! Whe-e-e-e! Spat!

Something screeched and crackled through the space his body had occupied the instant before, caromed off a jut of stone and slammed against the cliff. Hatfield had heard that splitting, crackling sound before, and once heard it is never forgotten—the close passage of a high-power rifle bullet. Only his instant reaction to a slight flicker of movement and a winking gleam where the denuded slope joined the base of the distant cliffs had saved him.

"Sunlight slanting on the rifle barrel!" he muttered as his own saddle gun lined sights across Goldy's withers.

Hatfield's green eyes, cold and deadly as the steel of the Winchester itself, glanced along the length of the barrel as a second slug whined past. Then the Winchester spoke, once, twice, a third time.

Puffs of dust along the base of the cliff told where the bullets struck. The Lone Wolf worked the ejection lever in a spinning blur of movement, shifted the black muzzle the merest trifle, squeezed the trigger a fourth time.

Smoke wisped from the rifle. The echoes slammed back and forth between the cliff.

Hatfield lowered his gun and stood staring at the black dot that had suddenly straightened, wavered an instant and then pitched forward. It hit the slope, slid, rolled, spun downward faster and faster, gathering to itself an increment of earth and bits of shale.

But the slope had been swept too clean for a second avalanche to result. The body reached the canyon floor in a cloud of dust and lay without sound or movement.

Hatfield did not spare it a glance. His whole attention was centered on the ominous shadow at the base of the distant cliffs. Back and forth his hawk glance traveled, until he had convinced himself that the drygulcher had no companion holed up somewhere and awaiting an opportunity to crack down.

"PLAYING a lone hand, I reckon," Hatfield muttered. "All right, Goldy. Let's see if we can

shuffle over there and take a look at what's left of the coyote. Reckon *he* was responsible for you runnin' yore legs down to yore knee-caps. Thanks, feller. If it hadn't been for you I'd be buried so deep they'd have to call out the reserves to dig me out in time for the Judgment Day!"

It was a hard flounder across the jumble of raw earth and littered stone, but they made it. Hatfield knelt beside the battered thing that had once been a man. With narrowing lids he noted the lank black hair falling in a straight bang over the swarthy forehead, the beady eyes, the high cheekbones. The face was dark, almost black.

"Yaqui," the Ranger muttered. "Yaqui rig, too."

Abruptly he bent lower, peering at the lank hair. With a tentative finger he raised a hanging lock, brushed it away from the forehead, let it fall back again.

"Well, I'll be blowed!" he growled.

He bent a long look at the dark face, then turned his attention to the dead man's accouterments.

The broad cartridge bandolier caught his eye. He fingered the empty loops. The fellow's pistol belt was full, but there weren't half a dozen rifle shells left.

"Musta done a heap of shootin' of late," the Ranger grunted. Then his eyes blazed with excitement. "No!" he exclaimed. "That *was* an explosion I heard just 'fore the avalanche started. This sidewinder emptied the powder from his rifle cartridges and set off a charge under a big boulder or a loose section of the cliff, knowing it would set the whole slope to sliding, and catch me 'fore I could get out.

"Smart! Wouldn'ta left a trace of me or Goldy either. Mighty smart! Too smart for a Yaqui! He didn't figger on that knoll—but who would! I didn't either, until it was right in front of me. He could see me riding, of course, 'fore the dust got too thick, and I reckon he was some flabbergasted to see me sittin' up top there after it cleared. Took a chance and lined sights on me. Mighty nigh got by with that, too. That little flicker of sun on his rifle barrel gave him 'way.

"Hmmm! Looks like somebody's getting sorta worried, and sorta anxious to blot my brand. I was right about the way I felt all day. Somebody *was* following me—been following me since I left town. When I turned into this canyon he figgered I was shore up to no good. Mebbe figgered me for knowing more'n I did. Well, *now* mebbe I know a lot more than they figger me to know!"

A careful search of the body revealed nothing of interest. Hatfield left it where it lay and began the difficult journey down the canyon. Both he and Goldy were heartily sick of the job by the time they reached its mouth.

But nevertheless Hatfield was elated. He had learned something that he considered gravely important.

"Hair!" he mused as they turned into the Chisos Trail. "A hair rope is strong 'nough to stop and hold a tough steer. Funny if just a few scattered hairs prove to be enough to hang a gent!"

THE day was far advanced and purple shadows were flowing up the canyon walls as the Lone Wolf rode the gloomy reaches under the overhang of the cliffs. As the Chisos Trail wound over the withers of a great ridge, a golden autumn moon soared up from behind the eastern crags, paled to silver and washed the naked pinnacles with ashen light. The purple shadows became ebon and the twisted forms of chimney rock and spire were grotesque and weird in the deceptive radiance, and seemed charged with malevolent life.

A solemn hush brooded over the lonely mountains, and Goldy's irons rang dully, the clean-cut edge of the sound furred and flattened by the swathing cloak of the silence. And then, born of the misty moonlight, the glowering stone and the shadows, there came a sibilant whispering that swelled to an ominous mutter and growl.

"We will kill you—we will kill you

if we can!" said the drums to the east. "We will kill you—we will kill you!" answered the drums to the west. And then in sinister muttering chorus:

"We will kill you! We will kill you! We will kill you if we can!"

* * *

In the office of the *Escondida* Mine in Coma a bitter argument was in progress. Old Mike Shaw was there, and Walt Wagner, the fat deputy sheriff, wetting his lips nervously.

There, too, was handsome, dark Henry Lyons owner of the Arrow Ranch, and sullen young Joe Hayes. Big old Train Beverly, owner of the XT, made a substantial balance at the foot of the long table.

"I tell yuh, Uncle Mike, I don't like it," Hayes was declaring. "Here a danged range tramp ambles into town, and just 'cause he happens to have a hoss strong enough to haul a stick of wood off top of a coupla rock busters, you go head and practically put him in charge of the mine. I say it's plumb foolishness. Don't forget, I've got some money tied up in this business."

"Yuh want to sell out?" Uncle Mike countered as quick as a hair-trigger. "I'm ready to buy, if yuh do."

Hayes screwed up his good-looking, but sullen face, into an obstinate knot.

"Nope, I don't," he declared. "But I want a say about my own money, that's all."

"Yuh'll get it," creaked old Mike. "I tell yuh, all you fellers, this jigger Hatfield knows his business. The way he talked about this hydraulic stuff showed me right off. I may not be plumb up on these new-fangled methods, but I do know the minin' business, and Hatfield mighty quick showed me he'd forgot more about geology and the mechanical end of minin' than I ever knowed. I wouldn't be surprised if he turned out to be one of them engineer fellers wanderin' around on a prospectin' jaunt of his own."

HENRY LYONS bent an inscrutable glance upon the speaker and tapped his long, blue-shaven chin with a supple forefinger. Young Joe Hayes flushed darkly.

"Somethin' like that's just what I'm scared of!" he spat. "I'm scared that jigger is too all-fired smart, and when we wake up to everything he's done we'll find ourselves hangin' onto the muddy end of the stick."

"Feller with eyes like his'n is liable to be anythin'," grumbled Walt Wagner in substantiation. "My gosh! When he looked at me the other night over them gunsights, I felt like I was gonna ooze away into a grease spot."

"You looked it," Hayes agreed contemptuously. "I figger yuh sweated off about five pounds while he was holdin' the irons on us."

"I didn't see you do no highfalutin' stunts!" Wagner fired back at him. "I thought yuh was gonna squeeze yore gun-stock into clabber, the way yuh hung onto it when he made yuh look like a terrapin tryin' to pull a frog out of a hole. That jigger could roll and light a cigaroot after yuh reached and still beat yuh to clearin' leather!"

"Don't you think this is all outa order?" Henry Lyons remarked in acid tones. "We all know Walt is too fat, and we likewise know Joe paws for his gun like a cub bear reaching for a stick. What we came here to discuss is the disposal of Ralston's and Dobson's shares in the *Escondida*. I can't figger how we got onto this new hand Uncle Mike hired."

"Yuh're right, Lyons," Hayes growled agreement. "I reckon the feller just sorta rubbed me the wrong way. I felt purty bad over pore old Bruce. After all, he was my first cousin, and sorta raised me. Reckon I'm just naturally a mite touchy."

"Speakin' of that," broke in Uncle Mike Shaw, "I don't reckon there'll be any argument as to who'll fall heir to Ralston's share in the mine. I reckon yuh're the only relative he had on earth, so far as anybody ever heard tell of Joe. Ain't that right?"

"I reckon so," Hayes agreed, adding reluctantly, "But I don't feel just right 'bout takin' over his ownin's. Mebbe Bruce mighta wanted somebody else to have 'em."

"I don't figger that," said old Train

Beverly. "Clate Dobson was the only close friend Bruce had, and Clate's gone, too. The courts will be plumb shore to hand the Bowtie and everything else over to you, Joe, and yuh can't do anything but take 'em.

"But as to pore old Clate's holdin's—I don't know. He didn't have nobody, I reckon. If he owed any debts the shares is likely to be sold to satisfy 'em. Anyhow, Uncle Mike owns controllin' interest, and he's the one to have the say as to how *Escondida* is run."

"I still figger we'd oughta keep on with the original mine," grumbled Hayes, argumentative to the last. "I don't go for these new-fangled contraptions. We—"

ABRUPTLY he paused, a queer look on his face, a glow in his deep-set eyes. Silence blanketed the room. Henry Lyons stared inscrutably out the open window, only a ripple of muscle along the angle of his jaw hinting at stress or emotion. The others sat tense and rigid, listening.

And through the open window came a whisper, a mutter, a vibrating beat. The mine building squatted on the lip of the slope some distance above the town, and the garrulous rumble of activity from the streets below was muted to a mere murmur. All about was moon-drenched stillness, with the black tower of the Phantoms swelling toward the star-flecked sky.

From far up the dark slope came the sound, persistent, penetrating, a monotonous beat that swelled and ebbed, swelled and ebbed—the harsh rasp of horny fingers drawn across taut hide:

"We will kill you! We will kill you! We will kill you if we can!"

CHAPTER VIII

Death from the Dark

YOUNG Joe Hayes broke the tense silence in the room.

"They sound mad-like, snarlin'," he muttered. He glanced at the drawn faces of his companions. "Gents," he said, his voice dry with strain, "gents, I bet there's a body layin' back in the hills somewheres."

The men glanced from one to another.

"That feller Hatfield," mouthed old Train Beverly. "He's comin' through the hills tonight, ain't he, Mike?"

"Uh-huh," Shaw replied in flat tones. "Uh-huh, and he'd oughta been here hours ago."

Young Joe Hayes stared, the strained expression of his features intensified. Henry Lyons relaxed in his chair. And through the ash of the moonlight filtered the ominous threat:

"We will kill you if we can! We will kill you if we can!"

The sinister mutter died away, ceased. The occupants of the room stirred, shifted their positions. Joe Hayes stood up.

"I'm moseyin' down into town to get me a drink," he announced. "Come along, Walt?"

The fat deputy nodded agreement. Henry Lyons left his chair, stared out the window a moment.

"We didn't settle much of anything," he remarked, but I reckon it'll keep. Good night, Mike."

He left the room and a moment later Train Beverly also took his departure. Old Mike remained seated at the table, bending over a scrawl of figures. His back was to the open window which, as the moon climbed higher, was a black rectangle of shadow.

Absorbed in his work, Shaw did not hear the stealthy, almost imperceptible scratch of feet on the ground outside the window. He did not see the solider shadow that loomed in the black rectangle, nor the glint of eyes through mask-holes under a low-drawn hatbrim.

For a long moment the glowing eyes fixed on the curved back of the old man. Then a hand appeared—a hand that gripped a short-barreled gun. The black barrel rested on the window ledge, steadied, lined with a spot between old Mike's scrawny shoulder blades.

For a tense instant the killer stood

Hatfield's double draw had been as swift as the flicker of a rattler's fangs (CHAPTER IV)

poised outlined hard and clear against the light within. Then the room rocked to a heavy report. . . .

* * *

It seemed to Jim Hatfield that the drum-beats which followed him across the withers of the great ridge were different from those he had heard the night Bruce Ralston was murdered. Then they had been exultant, triumphant, a swelling rattle and boom that chanted of victory. Tonight they were sullen, baffled, snarling of frustration, and rasping vindictive threat.

Their beat followed him down the moon-washed trail, pacing his advance, never drawing nearer, but never retreating. They seemed to hold, too, a note of expectancy. They were impatient, but they were waiting, sure of the ultimate result.

Next to the cliff wall was black shadow, and Hatfield kept his stirrup rasping against the rock. Never once did he venture into the pale light that lipped the crumbly edge and crawled ghostlike across the dusty surface. And ever and anon his green eyes swept the trail ahead, and the sinister spires and crags on the far side of the great gorge.

"THEY'RE over there somewheres," he growled. "Over there among the rocks. They know I'm ridin' here and they're lettin' me know they know it. But it's too far to line sights on me here in the shadow. They know that, too, and they also know that steady beat is almighty hard on the nerves.

"Feller is apt to get panicky as it keeps on and on. Get panicky and make a dash for it, slide out into the moonlight, and be all set to get a slug through him. A good saddle gun will carry across the gorge, all right, and carry to what a bead's drawn on, too.

"Thousand yards; mebbe a little more. But a Winchester like I'm packin' is sighted for that and then some. Would be mighty nice shootin', and it couldn't be done by the kinda irons Indians usually carry. Nor—" That last was a cryptic thought—"by the kinda shootin' Indians usually do."

On and on he rode, alert, watchful, until the gorge abruptly ended and the trail dipped over the crest and slid downward toward where the distant lights of Coma glowed like earth-bound stars. And as the great sorrel quickened his pace and Hatfield breathed a sigh of relief, from amid the spires and pinnacles black against the moonlight, the hidden drums snarled and cursed with baffled hate.

Hatfield cut across from the trail and approached the big stable from the rear. There were both front and rear doors, and the paunchy little stable-keeper who slept above the stalls, had given him a key to the back door.

"Don't usually do this," the stableman had explained, "but Uncle Mike recommended yuh strong, and that makes things sorta different." He added with a gulpy chuckle: "Reckon I'd done it anyhow, once I got a squint at that cayuse of yores. Feller with a hoss like that don't go liftin' crowbaits. He's got too good judgment and taste."

Hatfield had grinned at the left-handed compliment and had accepted the key. Now he was glad of it, for it was late and the stable-keeper might be hard to arouse.

With the swift efficiency of long years of practice, he cared for the sorrel and made him comfortable for the night. Then he locked the stable door again and cut across toward the gaunt loom of the *Escondida* Building.

He was much later than he had expected his return to be, and he wished to allay any anxiety on the part of Uncle Mike Shaw. On silent feet he rounded the corner of the rambling structure and halted dead, every nerve strained to a quivering tension.

Directly ahead was a ray of light that poured from an open window. And, clearly outlined against the light, a masked man leveled a gun across the window sill!

Hatfield instantly realized that the light came from Uncle Mike's office. And as instantly he acted. A blurring flicker of his right hand, a focusing stare of the green eyes and his Colt

roared just as the drygulcher tensed to pull trigger.

Hatfield saw the short-barreled gun spin from the killer's hand, heard his yelp of surprise and pain. Then, blinded momentarily by the flash of his own gun, Jim Hatfield leaped forward, shaking his head to clear his eyes.

Three running strides he took, and he was hurled backward by a tremendous blow on his chest.

SO VIOLENT was the impact that it spun the Lone Wolf off his feet and sent him crashing to the ground. Gasping for breath, he saw flame gush out of the dark beside the window, heard the wail of a slug through the air over his prostrate form. He rolled sideward, sent three shots roaring toward the flash, and rolled again.

But there was no answering blaze of gunfire. Only a swift whisper of running feet.

Hatfield sent another slug whining in the direction of the sound, shifted position and listened. There was a last fading patter, then silence, broken by the curses Uncle Mike Shaw was screeching through the open window.

Hatfield got painfully to his feet, feeling of the burning welt along his ribs.

"Didn't figger on there being a wire fence built along here," he grunted. "But mebbe it's a good thing I didn't. That killer was almighty fast, to get at his second iron. And that little 'hello-good-by' he sent in my direction came mighty close as it was. Mighta been worse than close if I'd been standing up."

He ran toward the window, shouting: "All right, Shaw! It's me—Hatfield! Don't go throwin' no lead out that window."

"What the tarnation blue blazes is goin' on around here?" howled Uncle Mike. "Where'd this hoglaig with a busted butt plate come from? What's all the shootin' about?"

Hatfield climbed the triple strands of wire that hemmed in the building. He skirted the open window, out of which Uncle Mike was now leaning, gun in hand, and entered the office. Shaw had his own gun in one hand, and in the other he was holding a stubby-barreled iron with one butt plate missing.

Unheeding the old man's yammer of questions, Hatfield took the damaged weapon from his hand and examined it.

"Uh-huh," he growled, "just as I figgered. This is the thing that killed Sheriff Dobson. See? It's a thirty-two-twenty, and"—his voice was grim—"it ain't the one I took off pore Ralston back there on the trail. This is the mate to that one, or I'm a heap mistook—and that one went away with the rattler who was linin' sights on you when I happened along."

In a few terse sentences he informed Uncle Mike of what he had seen upon rounding the corner, and described the subsequent happenings. Shaw drew a long breath.

"Thanks, son," he said quietly, but with deep feeling. "Now what all happened to yuh today? Why yuh so late gettin' back?"

Hatfield told him briefly, but omitting no important details. Shaw listened, his wrinkled old face drawn into stern lines. He nodded with satisfaction over the fate of the drygulcher who had started the avalanche, shook his head over the pursuing drums.

"THEY'RE out to get yuh, son," he declared. "They figger yuh're hornin' into their game, whatever it is, and they don't like it."

He hesitated, rasping his chin with a stubby forefinger.

"I don't like to say this," he remarked slowly. "Don't like to say it on my own account, 'cause I figger yuh to be mighty valuable to me in more'n one way right now, but I figger it's to yore best interests for me to say it. I'm gonna give yuh a mite of advice—fork that big yaller hoss of yore's and ride, ride fast and far. Get plumb outa this section while yuh're in shape to git out. Them hellions is bad—they've proved it more'n once—and they'll be after yuh worse'n ever after this day's work. That's my advice, son."

"Thanks," Hatfield replied. "I reckon it's a good advice, all right, and I'm much obliged to yuh for it."

"Yuh're takin' it, then?"

Hatfield smiled down at the little old man from his great height, but it was a smile of the lips only. His green eyes were somber and cold as a winter storm-cloud.

"Nope," he said evenly, "I'm not!"

Uncle Mike sighed. "I kinda thought as much," he admitted. "It's plumb foolishness for yuh to hang on, with things like they are, but yuh're shore a almighty nice fool!"

Hatfield grinned slightly, and changed the subject.

"They're gonna rush the machinery. We were lucky. A stock had been assembled at their Texas headquarters for shipment into Mexico, but the deal down there is hangin' fire and they say we can have it. It was bein' packed for shipment to us 'fore I finished wirin'. We should have it on hand in a few days."

"Fine!" exclaimed Uncle Mike, but he added pessimistically, "If any of us is alive to handle it when it gets here. Things are shore gettin' bad in this section—almost as bad as they was years and years ago, at the time of the Howard-Penelosa law-suit and the killin's that sprouted outa that."

Hatfield looked his interest. "How was that?" he asked.

"It's a considerable yarn," said Uncle Mike, "but I reckon it's worth listenin' to. It come about this way: You'll recollect that old writin' I showed yuh the other night said somethin' about the King of Spain grantin' all the land in this section to a feller named Enrique de Leon? Well, that waren't no Tanglewood tale — that act'ally happened, all right; it's history.

"That feller Enrique de Leon got killed somehow—just how don't seem quite clear, from the records. But I reckon old de Castro done him in somehow, as he confessed in his writin'. Anyhow, de Leon was cashed in, but he left relatives, heirs to his property.

"Them relatives, some of 'em at any rate, were in Mexico at the time. When de Leon didn't come back, his grandson, a feller by the name of Ramon Penelosa, come up here and took charge of Mescalero Valley, built him a ranchhouse, brought in cattle, lived here for years. Then—"

Sitting under the guttering lamp, with the window shutters closed against a chance return of the mysterious drygulcher, Jim Hatfield listened with intense interest to a stirring story of blood and greed and hatred and revenge of a bygone day.

CHAPTER IX

Blood of Spain

A PROUD man was *Don* Ramon Penelosa, related Uncle Mike. In his veins ran the blood of kings of Aragon, and of Moorish princes. His grandfather, the father of his stately mother, had been *Don* Enrique de Leon, friend and favorite of the Spanish king, the most powerful ruler of his day.

In gratitude for the deeds of that sturdy soldier, *Don* Enrique, the king had given to him a great grant of land in the province of New Spain. *Don* Enrique had journeyed to the wild new land in search of added fame and fortune, and had found—a grave!

Of this *Don* Ramon was thinking as he sat on the cool veranda of his spacious *hacienda* and gazed south by east toward where, misty with distance, the dark bulk of the Phantoms reared against the Texas sky. *Don* Ramon's gaze rested, and held, upon a mighty spire of stone that shot upward from the broken crest of the most westerly slope.

It was a peculiar appearing formation, that grim upward fling of naked stone. Mighty at the base, it tapered slightly, with a gnarled swelling midway its length, and from that swelling to its blunted tip, it bent inward slightly, for all the world like a gigantic beckoning finger.

The Devil's Finger, the first men of Spain had named the great shaft of stone. And to this day men fur-

tively crossed themselves when they gazed upon the ominous, beckoning finger of dark rock.

The winds and rains of ages had polished the stone to a mirrorlike smoothness, and mirrorlike it reflected the rays of the sun, concentrating and casting them afar in a dazzling beam that blinded the eye like the flash from a beacon light. The low-lying sun beat squarely on the lofty tip at the moment, and the reddish ray shot lancelike over *Don* Ramon's *hacienda* toward the unseen crests of the Cienagos beyond the mouth of the Mescalero Valley.

Don Ramon studied the ray, his shrewd black eyes narrowing with speculation, his lips smiling the smile of one who anticipates a pleasing event. *Don* Ramon was thinking of a legend that was more than a legend, a story that had come down to him from his grandfather's time.

He turned to his young son, little more than a boy, who sat on the far side of the table. With a supple finger he tapped the parchment that lay on the table, a parchment covered with intricate mathematical calculations.

"Success, my son!" he exulted in cultured Spanish. "The problem is at last solved. Soon the time will be at hand and we will acquire the wealth secreted by your illustrious ancestor who met so untimely a death. Here upon the parchment is the answer. See? I have worked it out to the last detail."

The boy stared at the figures, only vaguely comprehending their significance, and not in the least understanding the intricate process by which the solution had been arrived at.

"*Si*," continued *Don* Ramon, "it is here, but only my eye can read aright the meaning. Here is the key to wealth, my son, the wealth which shall send you across the waters to study in the great university of medicine and acquire the knowledge which will so benefit our people. Here, my son, into your care I give the parchment. Guard it until the time has come."

The boy took the paper, albeit reluctantly.

"But, Father," he protested, "I would rather stay with you than go across the waters. Cannot I study in our land of *Mejico?*"

Don Ramon smiled tolerantly, but replied with the despotic assurance of the teachings of an older land and an earlier day.

"Only in the land of your fathers can you acquire the greatest of knowledge," he replied with finality. "Peace! All is decided."

THE boy bowed his head obediently and left his father's presence, bearing with him the parchment. *Don* Ramon glanced up at the last gleam of the fiery ray and gave himself over to pleasant speculation.

Don Ramon was again sitting on his veranda the following afternoon when two men rode up, dismounted and approached the *casa*. *Don* Ramon arose courteously to receive them. One he recognized as the sheriff of the county, a shifty-eyed individual with a scrawny moustache drooping over a weak mouth. He was not a native Texan, but a dubious member of the rapacious followers of the devastation of war. He had achieved office by shifty political intrigue, as had altogether too many officials of the Texas of those dark times.

The other man was a stranger to *Don* Ramon. He was big-bodied, heavy-jowled, with a square chin, a merciless tight mouth and a truculent eye. His glance was one of disdain as it rested on the dignified Mexican, and it was plain to see that he had nothing but contempt for the courtly but inefficient sons of the land of *manana*.

The pair mounted the steps and the sheriff drew a folded paper from his pocket. He cleared his throat and tried to meet the grandee's inquiring gaze with a truculent swagger.

"*Don* Ramon," he announced, "yuh done lost the suit brought against you. The Judge has ruled yuh're on this land unlawful and I got a court order here orderin' yuh to vacate."

Ramon Penelosa stared, his face darkening with anger.

"But, senor," he replied, albeit

quietly, "I do not understand. This land was granted my ancestor by the then king of Spain. Such grants have before now been recognized by the courts of this land."

The sheriff grunted in his throat.

"The king of Spain ain't no great shakes in Texas these days," he growled, "and he didn't have no business grantin' Texas land to nobody. This grant ain't recognized by the court, and the court's tellin' you to get out, pronto, and make room for Mr. Howard, here, who's filed all proper and has got a grant from the state capital."

Don Ramon stood lance-straight and held the pair with his burning glance. Howard's cold gaze did not waver, but the sheriff shifted uneasily.

"I will appeal," the *hidalgo* declared. "I refuse to recognize as final the decree of Judge Dowley, whom I know to be a creature of imported politicians, such as you yourself are. There are honest men in Texas, no matter what their blood or their birth. I will appeal."

John Howard spoke for the first time.

"Yuh ain't got no grounds for appeal," he stated harshly. "This thing is settled all proper and legal, and there ain't no appeal, particular from this."

His hand flashed down as he spoke and came up holding a heavy gun. *Don* Ramon did not move, nor was there need.

FROM the doorway behind him crashed a stunning report. With a curse Howard reeled back, clawing at his right arm, from which blood spouted. The sheriff shot both hands high into the air.

Still *Don* Ramon did not move, nor did his expression alter.

"*Gracias,* Pedro," he said over his shoulder, then to Howard: "You see I have servitors who are loyal and upon whom I can rely for protection from the lawless. Let this be a lesson to you. Go now, and do not come back. I will appeal this ruling in the prescribed manner, and justice will be done."

He spoke again over his shoulder: "Pedro, come forth."

The man who stepped from the shadowy doorway held a cocked rifle in his hands. His lean, craggy face was swarthy almost to blackness. He wore his lank black hair cut in a square bang that fell over his low forehead. His beady black eyes stared at Howard with pleasureable anticipation.

"Pedro," said *Don* Ramon, "ride after these men and see that they leave my lands. That is all. *Adios, senors.*"

The swarthy man gestured with his rifle.

John Howard had seen full-blood Yaqui Indians before, and he had also seen something of their work. White with anger and pain, his eyes blazing with baffled fury, he yet had sense enough not to hesitate or argue.

He followed the sheriff down the steps and clumsily mounted his horse, careful of his bullet-punctured arm. One long look he bent upon the impassive *hidalgo,* then he rode away after the shivering sheriff, the grim *Indio* shepherding them, his eyes hungry for slaughter.

But John Howard was a hard man, and he had other hard men at his beck and call. Three nights later, just as the gray ghost of the dawn was stealing across the sky, *Don* Ramon Penelosa was awakened by a crash of rifle fire and a roaring of flames. He leaped from his bed as the front door of his *casa* was battered down.

Through the window he could see his barns blazing and his servitors being shot down by unseen rifles as they rushed from their adobes. Flinging open the door of his bedroom, he confronted John Howard, one arm bandaged, a gun in his good hand.

Howard shot Penelosa through the mouth and he fell, gasping and writhing, blood gushing over the polished floor. There was a scream of agony, and *Don* Ramon's young son rushed forward and knelt beside his dying father.

Don Ramon stared into his face with glazing eyes and tried to speak, but only a blood bubbling gabble of sound resulted. His tongue had been

shot in two. He fell back, and in another moment was dead.

The boy glared up with wild, frightened eyes.

John Howard stepped forward a pace, grim, purposeful, his gun jutting forward. But before he could cover the boy a figure was before him. It was the old senora, the mother of *Don* Ramon.

She raised her shriveled arms and blighted him with her flashing eyes. Then she cursed him with a terrible curse, a curse to reach down through the ages with its dire threat of blood and death and agony and tears.

"Even as you have done unto this house may God do unto you and yours!" she finished. "May you die in blood and pain, and those who come after you. May this land run red with their blood until justice be done. I see it! I see it! With my old eyes I see it! May you and all that is yours droop and wither from this night on!"

John Howard, hard as he was, quailed before the frantic figure and the bitter, burning words. He stepped back, sheathing his gun, and gestured to the grim old woman and the cowering boy.

"Drive 'em out with the rest of the scum!" he growled to his men. "No more killin'. Herd 'em south over the Border into Mexico. Get goin'!"

CHAPTER X

Breed of Men

OLD Mike Shaw's voice ceased, and Jim Hatfield came back to the present with a start. He stared at the mine owner.

"One whale of a yarn, all right," he agreed. "What happened after that?"

Old Mike shrugged. "Them was stern days," he replied, "and there was a lot of bad things done and got away with. Howard had that crooked sheriff in cahoots with him, and I heerd tell that old Judge Dowley was of similar stripe. Anyway, after drivin' what was left of *Don* Ramon's outfit, includin' the son and the old grandmother, down into Mexico, Howard cleaned out most of the other Mexicans in the valley.

"He got the order of the lower court confirmed, his grant declared legal, and took over Penelosa's spread. Things that happened was sorta hushed up, I reckon. But that feller Pedro, who was a Yaqui but educated in a mission, come outa the mess with a whole skin and passed on the story of what happened, just as I told it to yuh."

"Wonder what become of the boy?" Hatfield mused.

"Stayed down in *manana* land, I reckon," Shaw replied. "Never nothin' heard tell of him so far as I been able to hear. Reckon them figgers the old *Don* worked out didn't mean nothin' to him, though I expect they show how to find the *Escondida* Mine.

"Chances are that boy's been dead for years. Be an old, old man now if he isn't. Them things happened a mighty long time back. Howard evidently never took no stock in the mine yarn. He didn't file on this hill section—just down in the valley where there was good range. Which was lucky for me and other prospectors."

"And what happened to Howard?"

"Him? Oh, he went and got hisself killed all proper in a poker game here in Coma. Died mighty unpleasant and painful, I understand, and took a long time to do it. Kept gabblin' about the cuss the old senora put on him. His daughter inherited the Bowtie—that's what he named Penelosa's spread—and she married Bruce Ralston.

"They didn't have no kids and when she died, the spread come down to Bruce. Now he's dead and I reckon young Joe Hayes, his cousin, will get it—and mebbe the old senora's cuss with it. Yeah, with his *Escondida* holdin's, looks like Joe is packin' a double cuss!"

Hatfield repaired to the sheriff's office early the following morning to find out about the inquest. He found a lanky, taciturn individual seated at the sheriff's desk.

"Name's King—Neale King," the

sitter introduced himself. "Uh-huh, I'm a deputy—chief deputy, I reckon, now that Fatty Wagner's due to be sheriff. What's on yore mind?"

Hatfield told him. King dropped his booted feet to the floor and stood up, hitching his gun-belt a trifle higher. He was about as thick as an average scantling and something over six feet tall. He had a cool gray eye, an angular jaw and a tight mouth that nevertheless was grin-quirked at the corners.

"Reckon the jury'll be ready to set in about half a hour," he informed Hatfield. "C'mon, we'll mosey over together."

The inquest was brief and informal, the verdict of the jury laconic and to the point. It read:

These two citizens met death at the hands of party or parties unknown.

Added was a "rider" typical of a cow country jury:

But the red hellions had ought to be run down pronto.

HATFIELD found plenty to do in the days that followed. A flume had to be constructed to convey the water from the distant fall to the scene of mining operations, and this required his personal supervision.

"It's a sight cheaper than pipin', and mighty nigh as good," he explained to old Mike. "A covered flume of timbers leadin' to a dam above the falls will give us the head we need, and if we can get it done by the time the machinery arrives, we'll soon be set for operations.

"And, by the way—that feller Ted Harper is a mighty good man when he has somebody to show him what to do. Look they way he's takin' hold. He's got a knack of gettin' work out of men, too, and that goes a long way to making a good foreman. Reckon it was just as well yuh didn't fire him."

"Notion yuh're right," grunted Uncle Mike. "Ted's all right, only he's got too much temper. Now if he was like me, he—Hey! What the devil and Tom Walker! Where's that no-good coyote swamper? I told him not to set that double-blasted gabboon way over in the corner instead of where I keep it! I've squirted tobaccer juice all over the floor! Why that—"

Hatfield left the office grinning, with Uncle Mike's profanity boiling out the door in his wake. The Ranger mounted Goldy and rode up the slope to the distant canyon and the scene of operations.

It was a stiff climb, but Goldy negotiated the slope with little trouble. Hatfield found the new dam progressing satisfactorily. Harper already had his coffers down and was pumping water, preparatory to laying his anchors of cut stone. From farther up the canyon came the sound of ringing steel where axmen were felling trees for timber.

"A good stand up there about a quarter of a mile," Harper told the Lone Wolf. "We're lucky to find it growin' so close to the crik, and there's a nice gentle grade, too. Easy to snake the logs to the water's edge and float 'em down. I'm follerin' instructions close as to the dam."

Hatfield nodded. "I figger I've got it about right," he remarked. "It's like this, see? A large-sized 'hydraulic giant,' under a head of five hundred feet, will spout fifty cubic feet of water per second at a velocity of a hundred-and-eight feet per second. That will be sufficient to disintegrate the gravel and carry it to the sluices."

"As we work up the slope we'll lose head," Harper remarked.

Hatfield nodded with pleasure at the foreman's quick grasp of the problem.

"I'm countin' on that," he replied, "and later we'll build a secondary dam a mile or so up-canyon. Right now we don't need it—won't need it for some time, and it's important to get payin' gravel runnin' into the sluices soon as possible. And that's why I'm takin' so much time to explain everything in detail to you as we go along. If I don't happen to be here when the time comes, I want you to be able to handle the job."

Harper gave him a grateful look. "I'm shore a heap obliged," he de-

clared with feeling. "I'm learnin' more on this job than I ever learned all the rest of my worthless life. Reckon mebbe I'll be able to hold down a good job when yuh're finished with me, instead of workin' as a drift boss all my life."

"You take hold fast," Hatfield quietly complimented him. "And," he added, fixing Harper with his level green eyes, "if yuh can just learn to take hold of yoreself, to think 'fore yuh act, and not go on the prod until goin' on the prod means somethin' worthwhile, I got a hunch yuh'll do."

Harper reminiscently rubbed his big jaw, and grinned.

"Reckon yuh started learnin' me that the first time we got together!" he chuckled.

He gazed after the Ranger as Hatfield rode up the canyon, admiration and affection in his eyes.

"They shore were makin' *men* the day they put that big jigger together," he remarked softly to himself. . . .

COMA was a-buzz with speculation over the new project, and visitors to the scene of operations were plenty.

Among them were young Joe Hayes and Henry Lyons, who rode into the canyon together as Hatfield was returning from inspecting the felling of timber farther up.

Hayes was plainly displeased with the whole affair, and suspicious, and he took no pains to conceal his attitude. Lyons was interested, and asked courteous questions. In answer to one, Hatfield gestured toward the ominous fang of rock that towered from the slope crest so far above.

"So far as I can make out, the gravel bed runs right up to the base of that pinnacle," he said. "We'll cut up the slope just as far as we can, which will be a long way toward the crest. Then, if the upper level of gravel keeps showing gold in payin' quantities, we'll install hydraulic rams and build a reservoir up on top of the crest to get additional head."

Henry Lyons stared upward toward the gaunt outline of the Devil's Finger, while Joe Hayes glowered at Hatfield, muttering under his breath.

"Yuh'll spend the money as fast as it comes outa the mine," he growled at length.

Hatfield turned his level gaze upon him for an instant, then gestured to the busy scene in the canyon, and toward where far across and down the slope, other men, antlike in the distance, were diligently preparing place for the hydraulic machinery soon to arrive.

"Mebbe," he said quietly. "Mebbe I will, but it's givin' good honest work to lots of men, and it's bringin' in good men, men who are used to workin' for their livin' and who take pride in doin' something worthwhile. They'll make this out-of-the-way part of the country a lot better for their bein' in it, and that'll be good for Texas, and for all of our country."

For a moment he seemed to have forgotten his companions. His strangely colored eyes were bright with dreams—not dreams of self, or of self-advancement, but dreams of faith and pride in his fellowmen and the land of his birth.

Henry Lyons stared at him, his face suddenly strained. But before Hatfield glanced back, the man's features had resumed their dark immobility. Young Joe Hayes fumbled with his hat, cuffed it over one eye truculently, and seemed at a loss for words. . . .

Autumn was at hand, and the time of the fall round-ups in Mescalero Valley. The air was sharp and had in it the zest of old wine. Mystic purple haze swathed the summits of the hills in tremulous veilings and the hills themselves wore royal robes of scarlet and of gold.

More than ever were the Phantoms unreal, fantastic, and the gaunt spire of the Devil's Finger seemed to pierce the haze-sky. For the first time, Hatfield saw the fiery reflected ray shoot across the valley as the sun sank in blood behind the far distant wall of the Cienagos.

"IT'LL keep that up all the rest of the month," said Uncle Mike Shaw. "Toward the last of the month it'll start crawlin down the slope like a thin river of blood. That's how I

discovered *Escondida,* by follerin' that beam of light up the slope till I come to where the rocks and earth seemed to be all heaped up under the brush."

"Funny nobody else ever stumbled onto it during all the years, specially with the town of Coma only a coupla miles down there," Hatfield commented.

Uncle Mike shrugged his scrawny shoulders.

"Nothin' over-wonderful about it," he declared. "Look at them Coma trees all up the slope—just a wild tangle of brush and big thorns, growin' so close together a man can hardly force his way through. No ledges up there anywhere in sight—just the big wall of smooth rock that's the Devil's Finger. No ledges that look like they might have gold or silver in 'em. This shore don't look like a placer minin' section, either. It ain't. Yuh have to cut down deep into the gravel to turn up gold."

"Didn't washed-down gold ever show in the valley?" Hatfield asked.

"Uh-huh, it did," Uncle Mike admitted, "but yuh'll recollect the crik from the canyon where we're buildin' our dam runs down that way, and so do the other two criks to the north. Prospectors always figgered water-gold that showed come down them criks. They prospected them criks time after time, and found a little gold, not enough worth botherin' with. So the word got around that the criks here'bouts wasn't worth pannin'. The funny thing to me is how the old dons caught onto this gravel belt."

"Don't figger that's over-hard to come to," Hatfield told him. "That Coma growth up there doesn't look so old—fifty, sixty years at most. Chances are in their day there was little of it on this slope. Birds eatin' the berries in other places start such patches as this. Without much growth, the gravel would wash out durin' bad rains and show the gold."

"That's right," agreed Uncle Mike. "Just like hogs root up the soil and when the rain washes the mounds of dirt they nose up, gold shows. Lots of placer miners have hit it rich 'cause of hogs. Mebbe the dons had hogs with 'em."

Hatfield chuckled, but did not dispute the point.

His face grew somber, however, as his eyes fixed again on the tall bent shaft with its rounded summit bathed in bloody light. The thing had a fascination hard to explain. Hatfield felt as if it were exerting a definite pull upon his being, as if it were summoning him, drawing his spirit to its ominous dark breast.

CHAPTER XI

Riders of the Night

LONG years of solitude, of lonely nights in the saddle with only the far high stars and the wide reaches of plain and mountain and desert for company, had whetted the Lone Wolf's perceptions, had worn thin the veil that falls between man and the deep-seated primal impulses. He had learned to obey impulses, senseless though they might seem at times.

He usually called them hunches, chuckled derisively at them—and followed them! He followed one now.

"Uncle Mike," he asked, "ever been up to the foot of the cliff?"

"Huh? The Devil's Finger up there? Gosh, no! Why'd anybody want to go up there? I had trouble enough scramblin' up this everlastin' ridge through the thorns when I was huntin' for *Escondida,* and cussin myself for a fool at every step. I shore didn't have no hankerin' to claw my way up to that hunk of rock with a cuss on it. I never heard tell of anybody that did, and there's lots of loco gents in this section, too. Why?"

"I was wondering if it is possible to get up there without fighting the slope through the brush?"

Uncle Mike grew thoughtful. "I got a notion yuh could cut across from the Chisos Trail, travel around that bulge over to the north of the Finger and claw along the base of the cliffs," he admitted. "Why?"

"Oh, I've got a notion I'd like to ride up there sometime," Hatfield replied.

Uncle Mike made some pungent remarks anent the foolishness of humanity in general and cowpunchers in particular, and the subject dropped.

Hatfield did ride "up there," the following day, although he made no mention of his immediate intentions to Uncle Mike Shaw. He left the Chisos Trail several miles above town and made his painful way along the base of the ragged cliffs that flanked the Finger.

The thorny brush was sparse near the foot of the cliffs, but there was enough of it to put Goldy in a thoroughly bad temper. Nor was the temper of the sorrel improved when, upon rounding the bulge Uncle Mike had mentioned the day before, he was forced to wade along the bed of a small stream which washed the base of the cliffs for some distance before diagonaling in a northerly direction toward Mescalero Valley.

Several hundred yards of slipping and floundering over water-smoothed stones, and the stream turned almost at right angles to where it gushed from a narrow gorge. The south wall of this was the towering bulk of the Finger.

It was a weird and impressive formation, reminding Hatfield somewhat —though less in size and height—of famed *El Capitan* in the Yosemite.

High, high into the blue heavens soared the great curved spire of dark granite. From where Jim Hatfield gazed up its shining surface it seemed to him that the gigantic mass was leaning over him, menacing him with its monstrous might, threatening to crush to powder any presumptuous being who should come seeking to fathom its grim secrets.

SLOWLY he rode along its slightly rounded base, the ground rising abruptly to a ridge about the middle of the spire. Far down the slope he could see the flash and glitter of Coma's windows struck by the rays of the low-lying sun. The buildings of the town seemed cut out of cardboard and propped up between the vast swell of the lion paws that curved about Mescalero Valley.

The base of the Finger was washed in shadow, but high above the sunlight struck fair upon the polished surface. And suddenly the great reflected ray shot like a sword of bloody flame through the haze of the autumn sky.

Hatfield rode on, scanning the spire, the little bare, swelling plateau which skirted its base, the rolling brush-clad slope below. Somehow, he felt, this sinister tower of dark granite played a part in the evil that was being done here in the once peaceful valley.

Suddenly he pulled Goldy to a halt and sat staring at the softer ground he was now traversing.

"Well," he told the cayuse, "old Mike may have been sincere when he said nobody ever came up here, but he shore was a heap mistook!"

The spongy soil in the shadow of the spire was deeply scored by hoof prints, many of them, and of varying age. Hatfield instantly noted that while some were the clean-cut scars of irons, the majority appeared to have been made by unshod horses. Slowly he rode on, studying the tracks.

"A lot of somebodies have been traveling past here," he mused, "and goin' and comin'. Looks, too, like they been in a habit of stoppin' here on this level space."

He glanced downward again, toward where Coma was misty with distance, and growing unreal in the fading light.

"Wonder if anybody up here could be seen from down there anywhere?" he asked himself, deciding quickly that, due to the inward slope of the little plateau and the height of the growth which fringed its lip, they could not.

He was just about the middle of the curving wall of the spire, now, and he turned his glance toward its gleaming surface. His eyes traveled over it and his interest quickened. He set Goldy close to the gently curving face and sat staring.

Undoubtedly at this point the surface had been scarped by the hand of

man. Hatfield could plainly see the marks of rock-cutting tools. A section of the stone had been chiseled away leaving a smooth, flat expanse. And, scored deep in the living rock, were characters in precise lines.

"Spanish," muttered the Ranger, leaning close. "Spanish words cut in the rock, and not so long ago, either."

Peering in the dim light, he translated the brief message:

The stream of the North and the stream of the South shall join ere murder blood cease to cry out for vengeance.

For long minutes Hatfield stared at the cryptic message, his dark brows drawing together until the concentration furrow was deep between them. He shook his black head, shoved back the brim of his wide hat and rumpled his crisp hair in perplexity.

THE words did not seem to make any sense at all. But the painstaking care with which they had been cut so deeply into the stone, involving no mean amount of labor, scouted the idea that they were nothing other than the work of an idle moment.

"They mean s o m e t h i n g," h e growled, "and something mighty important, or I'm a heap mistook." He repeated under his breath: " 'Stream of the North, stream of the South.' Now what—"

Abruptly he turned Goldy's head and rode straight to the lip of the plateau. He was opposite the exact center of the Finger, at the apex of the gentle curve, and at the crest of the ridge, and could glance along the plateau in either direction.

Gazing to the south, his eye caught the gleam of hurrying water. In another instant he had traced it to its source—a big spring boiling up from under the south wall of the Finger, and hurrying southward to dive into the black mouth of a canyon.

He turned and glanced north. There, too, was the gleam of swift water—the little stream through which he had waded his horse a short time before, the stream that ran in a northerly direction before curving toward Mescalero Valley.

And between the sources of the respective brooks swelled the mighty bulk of the Devil's Finger, with a steeply rising grade from either source.

"Over there's the 'stream of the North', and over this way is 'the stream of the South'," he muttered. "And the way they're headed now, it shore will be an almighty long time 'fore they get together!"

He turned and again stared at the grim inscription, shaking his head dubiously.

Jim Hatfield understood the irresistible Latin impulse to be dramatic. But he understood, too, the deathless memory, the grim tenacity of purpose of the land of *manana* where blood feuds are concerned. It did not seem strange to him that some dark-faced son of the fiery land should cut this sinister promise and threat into the ageless stone, seeing in this weird pinnacle bathed in bloody light, a symbol fitting to his mood. Nor did he in the least discount the evil that might grow therefrom.

"Looks like somebody hereabouts has a score to settle," he mused.

He wondered if he had by chance hit onto the explanation of the apparently senseless killings and torturings that had plagued the valley of late, and which had brought the Lone Wolf to the scene. The idea appeared preposterous. So far as he had been able to learn, Ralston, Sheriff Dobson, and old Mike Shaw had no enemies worth mentioning.

Dobson, in his official capacity, might have incurred hatred, but Hatfield considered the reason for the sheriff's murder as fairly obvious—to recover the odd calibered gun that might have served to identify the killer or killers of Bruce Ralston, owner of the Bowtie Ranch. The other outrages of which Hatfield had learned appeared to be wanton depredations without rhyme or reason.

Hatfield again rode to the edge of the plateau and sat gazing toward Coma and the mouth of the Mescalero Valley. The sun had set, the fiery

reflected ray had vanished, and the lovely blue dust of the dusk was beginning to sift down from the hills.

Obeying a sudden impulse, he wheeled Goldy and rode southward toward the dark mouth of the canyon into which the stream vanished.

IT was a fairly wide canyon whose sloping sides tumbled sharply through a welter of growth toward its distant floor. The stream dived over its steep box with a silvery roar. The box end was much lower than the side walls, the northern one of which was the dizzy loom of the Devil's Finger.

Along the base of the Finger a trail ran, and Hatfield could see that it had been recently traveled. As far as he could see in the dying light, the rock wall extended, with the growth-covered slope climbing steeply to join it, and with the trail flowing along its base.

"An old-timer, this track," muttered the Ranger. "Runs almost due south and across the Mexican Line. Got a notion it was one of the smugglin' routes in the old days—might be yet, for that matter. Shore has been traveled of late.

"I reckon the brush growing up thick on the slope above Coma changed a lot of things hereabouts. Chances are this trail was used a lot of years ago, 'fore the revolutions swept all the section south of the Big Bend clean of folks and spreads. Then, with nobody to come this way from the south, it wasn't used any more, so the brush grew up and hid where it crossed over to join the Chisos, and folks up here forgot all about it.

"Right common happenin' all along the Border, that is, and specially in this out-of-the-way section. Which is one of the things that makes smugglin' and rustlin' and robbin' so darned easy, and Ranger work so darned hard! And I bet a peso the gents that have been riding this goat track of late haven't been doin' it for any good."

It was not really a goat track. Hatfield quickly realized that as he rode along it in the shadow of the towering wall. It was level and wide, actually a road in its dimensions.

Soon he decided it really *was* a road, or at one time had been. The marks of tools were plain on the rock wall to his left, and the surface was smooth and free from boulders, although in places grown with grass and clumps of brush.

The height of the brush, a slow-growing species of chaparral, aroused Hatfield's interest.

"Been there a long, long time," he mused. "Funny the folks who took such pains to build this track would let brush stand in the middle of it."

Suddenly he gave a low whistle. He had hit on the obvious solution to the mystery!

"The road the old dons built!" he exclaimed. "The road they used to carry the gold from *Escondida* down into Mexico! They didn't use the Chisos Trail—wasn't any Chisos Trail in them days to use. That came later, with the cattle that was run into Mescalero Valley, years and years after old De Castro was killed by the Indians and the mine mouth covered up.

"Chances are this road hasn't been used since then. Or until the gents who made these tracks I'm ridin' over right now happened along. What I'd like to know is why they're usin' it now . . . Well, it's gettin' pretty dark. Reckon I'd better call it a day and head back to town."

He rode on a little farther, however, toward where the trail swung around a bulge in the rock wall, beyond which he could not see. He reached the bulge, followed its gradual curve. And suddenly Goldy pricked his ears in an attitude of listening.

HATFIELD heard it, too—a muffled click and pad. His hand tightened on the bridle. And at that instant horses swung around the bulge only a few yards distant.

For an instant there was stunned inaction on both sides. Then Hatfield saw the quick gleam of a drawn gun. He was slewing sideward in the saddle when flame gushed toward him.

Hatfield's mind worked at racing speed. To wheel Goldy and ride back

the way he had come would be tantamount to committing suicide. The road ran straight as an arrow for hundreds of yards, and the light was still good enough for accurate shooting. He would be drilled dead center before he had covered a double score of feet. To shoot it out with a dozen or more gunmen would be but to make a glorious, but utterly senseless end.

Before the crash of the report followed the whine of the passing slug, the Lone Wolf acted.

"On, Goldy!" he thundered, clamping the sorrel's barrel with legs like bands of steel. Straight into the flame of the roaring guns raced the golden horse.

What Hatfield did was the last thing the horsemen expected him to do. With yells of pain and terror they scattered before his roaring guns. Horses clanged over the edge of the trail into the growth. Others slammed against the cliff. Their riders howled and cursed.

Into their demoralized ranks crashed the raging golden horse, teeth bared and clashing, ears laid back, eyes rolling, red nostrils flaring. Hatfield slashed right and left with the barrels of his smoking guns. He had a wild, blurred vision of distorted dark faces, rearing broncs, flashing guns and frantic pack mules bearing unwieldy burdens.

A skyrocketing dazzle of intense white light, a numbing shock, and he knew he was hit. But even as he reeled in the saddle he was clear of the mad walter of men and horses. Down the trail crashed Goldy. Reeling, swaying, with blood streaming down his face, Hatfield twisted in the saddle and flung his last bullets at the milling mass.

With a roar like a thousand thunderclaps the very mountains seemed to reel and rock. A volcano-blaze of reddish flame hurled back the shadows. Goldy sprawled in his stride, all but swept from his feet by a hurricane blast of air that seemed to scorch his coat. He screamed with fright.

Through the appalling turmoil knifed a soaring shriek of agony. There was a crackling and rumbling, and a series of sodden thuds. The darkness swooped down on a screeching babble of voices and the whinnies of terrified beasts.

With his last failing strength, Hatfield tugged sharply on Goldy's right rein. The sorrel swerved, staggered, caught his footing by a miracle of agility and went floundering and crashing down the steep slope. Shots were fired from above, and the bullets whined close. But an instant more and the tall brush hid the Lone Wolf from view as he slithered onward toward the distant canyon floor.

Hatfield mechanically holstered his empty guns and swayed forward, clutching at the horn with nerveless fingers. With his face buried in the coarse black mane, he lay along the sorrel's neck, his thighs still clamping him in the saddle.

But as the slope leveled off and Goldy came to a sobbing halt in a little cleared space, the Lone Wolf swayed gently, and relaxed. He slid from the sorrel's back and lay silent and motionless, his bloody face buried in the grass.

CHAPTER XII

Roundup Night in Coma

UNCONSCIOUS beside his patient horse, Jim Hatfield never knew how many hours he lay there. It was Goldy's uneasy nuzzling at his face with velvet lips that finally brought him around. He opened his eyes, closed them quickly as pain stabbed like a white-hot knife.

For minutes he lay fighting a deadly nausea. Then, as he breathed deeply of the cool night air, his aching head began to clear. He opened his eyes once more and stared up at a blazing net of stars. Beside him the sorrel loomed dark and gigantic.

"All in one piece, old-timer?" the Ranger inquired shakily.

Goldy gave an explosive snort that undoubtedly bespoke thankfulness and relief. Then he whinnied softly

and pawed the ground with a dainty hoof.

Hatfield sat up, with an effort, still fighting against the roiling sickness. He was stiff and sore and his teeth chattered with cold. He could feel a crusting of dried blood on his face and, as he raised a shaking hand to his head, he winced at the contact of his fingers with torn, ragged flesh.

Resisting the pain, he explored the cut with a finger-tip.

"Just creased—shallow furrow—and it's stopped bleeding," he muttered thankfully.

To his ears came a sound which he recognized as the ripple of water over stones, and he was conscious of a raging thirst. He got to his feet and stood swaying. Then, leading the horse, he staggered off in the direction of the sound.

A moment later he reached the bank of a little stream that ran through the canyon. Side by side, he and the horse drank deeply of the clear, cold water.

Hatfield bathed his blood-crusted face and tied a water-soaked handkerchief about his injured head. The chin-strap had held his hat in place despite his fall, and he found that by tilting it a little more than normally, the bandage would be hidden from view.

He removed Goldy's saddle and bridle and allowed the cayuse to roll, and then crop the grass. Hatfield meanwhile rolled a cigarette and sat at the edge of the stream and smoked, his strength coming back and the ache in his head abating.

Finally he stood up, shook himself, and put the rig back on Goldy. Carefully reloading his guns, he mounted and sent the sorrel at the slope.

"Let's go up and see what pulled the mountain down," he said.

It was a hard and painful pull up the brush-clad slope. But Goldy made it as the silent dawn spread its red mantle over the lonesome mountains.

In the strengthening light, Hatfield stared at the deep crater hollowed out in the center of the trail. The cliff wall was splashed with ominous dark blotches that had not been there the night before.

In the bushes nearby he found the shattered body of a man, a man whose lank black hair and swarthy face interested him greatly. He found a second body not far from the first one, with a black hole in the middle of the forehead.

THIS second man was of ruddy complexion and had bristly red hair. But a third body crumpled against the cliff was of dark coloring similar to the first.

There was a similarity in the clothing of all three—fringed buckskins and moccasins. Hatfield also noted a crumpled sombrero heavy with silver ornaments.

"Belonged to the red-headed jigger," he deduced. "Reckon the other two went bare-headed, Yaqui style."

He found two dead horses and his green eyes narrowed as they rested on the ragged wounds where the brands had been ripped away. There was also a dead mule, its head torn from its shoulders, and scattered about were fragments of flesh, including a portion of a mule's leg, upon the hoof a worn shoe.

Hatfield studied these grisly remains thoughtfully.

"Reckon that pore devil of a mule was packing the load of dynamite my bullet set off," he mused. "Now what in blazes, do yuh suppose, an owlhoot outfit such as that shore musta been was doin' packin' a load of dynamite in an *aparejo?* Were they figgerin' on blowin' a bank vault or a strongbox in a stage coach? I wonder!"

Further search disclosed the shredded remins of an *aparejo,* or pack-sack. Its contents had evidently been carried away. But, partially hidden by a clump of brush, and doubtless overlooked in the darkness, was a steel drill and the head of a pick. Hatfield examined both with frowning brows.

"Tools for rock work," he declared. "That drill's the proper diameter for drivin' a hole to receive dynamite cartridges. Now what in all tarnation *does* this mean?"

He went over the ground with me-

ticulous care, but found nothing more of interest. Thoughtfully he mounted the sorrel and rode on up the canyon, eyes and ears alert, hands close to his guns.

But there appeared no trace of the dark riders, although the damp ground in the shadow of the Devil's Finger showed signs a-plenty of their passage. What puzzled Hatfield greatly, however, was the lack of evidence of their entering the Chisos Trail.

"Smart," he decided at last. "Plumb smart! Took no chances and covered their tracks so's nobody could tell just where they hit the trail or which direction they traveled. Wonder where in blazes they are now, or if—"

A thought struck him and he turned Goldy and again splashed through the stream and climbed the slope of the narrow plateau. With minute care he examined the soft ground. Finally he straightened up and nodded with satisfaction, but with a perplexed furrow wrinkling his brow.

"They come back this way last night while I was snoozin' under that bush down there in the canyon," he declared to Goldy. "I was outa my senses for quite a spell, all right, but not long enough for that outfit to go far and get back again. Certainly not down Mescalero Valley any distance or to Welch.

"Coma musta been where they were heading for. But why pack dynamite and tools to Coma from down Mexico way? That's like carryin' hay onto the prairie in summertime. Plenty of dynamite in Coma. Tools, too. But, "—he grew reflective, "mebbe they didn't wanta buy 'em there. Which shore proves for fair they were up to no good with that load of blastin' powder. Wonder if they had more'n one load?"

HE wondered, too, if the mysterious riders had conducted a search for him on the return trip, but decided that doubtless they had not. They would, it was reasonable to believe, have assumed that he had made his escape, was holed up in the brush, or that his dead body was lying somewhere in the wilderness of growth. In either case it would have been folly to comb the canyon in the darkness.

Hatfield was devoutly thankful that Goldy was a silent horse. The sorrel was not given to advertising his presence by neighing when his fellow-kind were in the neighborhood.

Upon reaching Coma, Hatfield decided that his wound did not require medical attention. So, after dressing it himself, he went to bed.

Darkness was falling once more when he awoke to the sound of shouts and cracking guns. For a moment he lay listening, then he called a question to Ted Harper, whom he could hear thumping about in his adjoining room.

"Trail herd and roundup crews comin' into town," Harper called back through the thin partition. "It's payday on all the big spreads hereabouts and at the mines, too. Batches been comin' in all day, and loaded for bear. Feller, there'll be a high time in this pueblo tonight!"

As Hatfield ate in a nearby restaurant, he was inclined to believe that Harper had not overstated. Mounted cowboys whooped and clattered up and down the street. The sidewalks were crowded, the air tingling to a whirl and babble of sound. Every saloon, and there were plenty of them, blazed light and blared what was confidently called music. Raucous voices bawled something claimed to be song, and others just as raucous bawled curses at the singers.

Men bellowed with mirth and bellowed with wrath. The rumble of deep tones blended raggedly with the high-pitched voices of women and their shrill laughter. There was a constant clinking of bottle necks against glass rims.

On the dance floors heavy boots clumped, and high heels clicked. The clatter and rattle of roulette wheels slid smoothly over the snaky slither of cards and the sprightly chuckle of dice galloping across green cloth. There was a whine of fiddles, a soft thrum of guitars, a pert tumping of banjoes.

Gold clinked musically at the gambling tables, and rang sharply on the bars. Swaggering punchers and beard-

ed miners sat across from waxen-faced gamblers in long black coats and snowy shirt-fronts. There was a flash and glow of silks and satins and the gleam of white skin where the dance-hall girls whirled in the arms of brawny partners who cavorted with all the grace and abandon of frolicking bears.

This was Coma's big night of the year—the roundups finished, the trail herds loaded and rumbling east and north, money burning holes in pockets, and itching to be spent.

The hundreds of mine workers were there, too, with a month's pay to blow in one riotous night. Gold black with blood and salty with the sweat of utter toil was to be thrown away in wild abandon.

What difference! Plenty more where this came from! Did a man want to live forever? What for? He was a "younker" tonight—tomorrow he would be an old man!

The invitations to celebrate flew thick and fast. "Belly up, boys! This one is on me!" "Down the hatch!"

"And another one for a chaser!"

HATFIELD finished his meal, smoked a leisurely cigarette and sauntered out into the street. His green eyes were lazy, indifferent, traveling over the jostling throng with apparent aimlessness, just as his tall form passed with the same apparent aimlessness along the creaking board sidewalk.

But the long green eyes missed nothing. They were searching—searching for dark faces of which they had caught but distorted glimpses the night before.

But a glimpse of a face was enough for the Lone Wolf. The features would be indelibly engraved on the tablets of his memory. They would be instantly recognized, no matter what the place, company or conditions in which they were next encountered.

Slowly he made his way up the crowded street, easy, assured, walking with the lithe grace of youth and strength and perfect muscular coordination. Men, and women, turned to gaze at him, attracted by the rhythmic perfection of his motion, impressed by the lean, bronzed face that was too full of manpower to be handsome in the strict sense of the word, but wonderfully attractive in its magnetism and vitality.

Bleak-faced individuals with hard and watchful eyes glanced at him in sideward fashion, taking in at a single swift sweep the slim, powerful hands, the filled double cartridge belts snugged about the lean, sinewy waist and the heavy guns hanging low against the muscular thighs. The black butts flared slightly from his hips and always seemed near to those quiet deadly hands.

"Salty," was the general verdict. "Plumb salty, and a cold proposition!"

And these watchful wanderers of the wastelands, these men with their backs to the past and not caring to look to tomorrow, wondered covertly who the tall two-gun man might be. But carefully they took no steps to find out.

Shortly before midnight, Hatfield encountered Neale King, the taciturn deputy sheriff, who greeted him with a nod of, for him, unwonted cordiality.

"Gonna be some night 'fore she's over," remarked King. "Listen to her howl, will yuh? And yuh ain't heard nothin' yet! The boys are too busy gettin' full of red-eye as yet to really act up. Wait'll that red-eye gets to boilin' in their bellies, and then hunt a hole and pull it in after yuh!"

Hatfield chuckled. "Does look sorta up-and-comin'," he admitted. "Where is Wagner, the new sheriff?"

King grunted. "Him and Joe Hayes is around together somewhere," he replied. "Chances are they're over to Ruby's by now. Usually are by this time of evenin'. Escolita does her first dance at midnight."

"What's Ruby's, and who is Escolita?" Hatfield asked, as he fell in step with the deputy.

"Ruby's is Ruby's Saloon and Dance-hall run by Ruby, who musta been one plumb swell looker once upon a time and ain't so bad now," replied King. "Escolita is about a hundred pounds of white fire and black lightnin' and

essence-of-volcano wrapped in the skin of the purtiest gal that ever come outa *manana* land. She's what makes old fellers like me wish we was young again, and young fellows like you give up tryin'. I even believe she could make Fat Wagner stop eatin' and get thin. If Joe Hayes hadn't been plumb loco, 'fore he saw her the first time, he shore is now."

"Say, where is this here Ruby's?" demanded Hatfield. "I'll judge all this for myself."

"Come along," invited King, "I'm amblin' over that way now. Dust off yore eyes, feller. Yuh're gonna see miracles!"

CHAPTER XIII

"Miracles"

RUBY'S proved to be the biggest and brightest saloon Hatfield had yet visited in Coma. It was near the western end of the main street, which was a section of the Chisos Trail that wound through the heart of the cowtown. Beyond were the wide reaches of Mescalero Valley, shadowy and mysterious in the starlight. Behind the saloon ran a dark alley.

The bar ran the full width of the sprawling room and was glittering with mirrors and many bottles of various hues. Four busy bartenders sloshed drinks into waiting glasses and wiped their perspiring faces on their white aprons.

To one side were poker tables, roulette wheels, a dice table and a faro bank, the latter largely patronized by swarthy Mexicans in black velvet trimmed with silver. Their wide sombreros boasted gay bands and much silver ornament. The majority, Hatfield deduced, were from the big *haciendas* to the southwest, though doubtless some came from the Mexican-owned ranches near the mouth of Mescalero Valley.

The greater part of the floor space was given over to dancing. Here all was a whirl and glitter of changeful color. Girls in scarlet gowns, in white satin, in blue, danced with miners whose brawny shoulders were encased in woolen shirts of various gaudy hues.

Lithe young cowboys wore neckerchiefs of yellow or wine or purple. Mexican dandies provided a rich, dark touch with their somber velvet. Here and there gleamed the immaculate shirt-front of a gambler who had deserted the tables for the moment to relax in the company of the lady of his choice.

It was a laughing, chattering, good-tempered crowd, for the moment at least. The temper might well change as the night wore on and the fumes of drink steeped the brains of the dancers. Now all was gayety.

Hatfield sensed a subtle undercurrent of anticipation, especially on the part of the younger men. Glances were cast in the direction of a curtained doorway near the far end of the bar. An open space led from the doorway with its drapes of smoldering red velvet to the center of the dance floor.

The Ranger turned at the sound of Neale King's voice at his elbow.

"Hatfield," the deputy was saying, "I want to make yuh acquainted with Ruby. Ruby owns these here diggin's."

From his great height, Hatfield gazed down upon the woman King had escorted through the crowd. He smiled gravely, removed his hat and bowed, the light of the hanging lamps seeming to strike a blue shadow on his thick hair, so black it was.

"It's shore a pleasure, Miss Ruby," he acknowledged in his deep, soft voice, and took the white hand she proffered in his sinewy fingers.

The woman glanced at him strangely, and hesitated perceptibly before replying.

"Ruby's sorta sizin' yuh up," King chuckled.

She smiled, with a flash of white teeth against her scarlet lips.

"Yo'-all are suhtanly s i z e a b l e enough," she said in throaty, drawling tones. "Can't say as I ever saw a taller man 'cept ol' Majah Dickson down home in Noo O'leans."

"You are from Louisiana, Miss

Ruby?" Hatfield asked courteously.

Ruby shrugged her white shoulders.

"I'm from most any place," she replied, a sudden hard note in her voice.

HATFIELD glanced down at her curiously. She was a striking woman, superbly tall. She could not have been more than thirty years old, he judged, but in her large blue eyes with dark circles under them was something that hinted of untold age.

Her face must have been lovely once, and it held the haunting ghost of beauty still, with features of clear-cut classic regularity. Her hair was dead gold, with high-lights of burnished copper. Hess, Hatfield instantly sensed, was an irresistible power possessing a mysterious affinity for men, a power linked with wisdom and utter ruthlessness.

And yet, in the depths of the fine eyes was something not altogether corrupt. The shadow, perhaps, of a spirit stifled and starved, but still crying weakly and persistently for expression.

Acknowledging this, he smiled down at her, and Ruby instinctively smiled back. Then she turned away, signaled with a white, beringed hand to the orchestra leader. The music stopped, attendants began clearing the floor of dancers.

Ruby raised her hand again. The orchestra swayed into a lilting melody, the red velvet curtains fell back, and Jim Hatfield saw the "miracle!"

Through the space between the drawn curtains flashed a girl in a flame-colored gown. And, for a fleeting instant, Jim Hatfield almost felt it was a living flame wafted on the invisible wings of the music.

She was slender and dainty, with curves where curves were in order, and vibrant with the vitality of silvery water leaping in the sunshine. Graceful with the grace of a flower swaying in the dawn wind, and cool and sweet with the coolness and sweetness of moonlight glancing on the first green leaves of spring. Warm with the pure warmth of starlit summer nights, and mysterious with the mystery of autumn's brooding hush.

She had long, dark eyes and there seemed to be red shadows in their depths. Youth and beauty and magnetism and charm—she had them all. And as a glorious crown, a womanly sweetness and sympathy that even the least observant could not fail to sense.

Hatfield turned to Neale King as a roar of applause shook the room.

"You win," he chuckled in a low voice. "My eyes need dustin'!"

The girl danced, and she danced with Latin abandon and the utter sureness of self that bespeaks the artist. Hatfield instinctively realized that there was nothing of exhibitionism in her performance. It was the spontaneous, elemental dancing of a child, a pure impulse of youth and spirit and pulsing life.

She flung back her curly head and laughed with a laugh like a peal of little silver bells. Her teeth flashed white and even. Her red lips, which were devoid of paint as were her creamily tanned cheeks, were parted, and her dark eyes crinkling at the corners.

[*Turn page*]

NO FINER DRINK FROM POLE TO POLE
BETTER TASTE
PEPSI-COLA
REG. U.S. PAT. OFF.
BIGGER DRINK
Purity... in the big big bottle — that's Pepsi-Cola!

Hatfield glanced down at Ruby, who was standing a little apart. Her cold, regular features had softened and there was a tenderness in her blue eyes, and pride. Neale King interpreted his glance.

"RUBY watches over that gal like an eagle over an adopted chick," King said in low tones. "Escolita dances *for* the trade, but not *with* anybody . . . Where's she from, yuh say? Down Mexico way somewheres . . . Yeah, shore she's Mexican, or rather, I'd say, old Spanish blood. Shore a funny thing that she should be dancin' here in a Coma honky-tonk . . . Say, take a look at Joe Hayes, will you?"

There was a table near the edge of the dance floor, a table covered with bottles and glasses. Escolita soared to its top like a wind-whirled leaf. Amid bottles and glasses she danced, and her tiny feet disturbed not one.

Standing beside that table was young Joe Hayes, gazing up at her. His handsome, obstinate face had softened, the sullen lines were smoothed out, and his very soul showed in his hungry eyes. He seemed utterly fascinated, and his gaze was fixed on the girl's face as to a magnet.

Escolita paused in her dance, her eyes laughing at the applause. She glanced down at Hayes, met his longing look, and for a moment Hatfield sensed a peculiar light in her dark eyes, a subtle change in the expression of her sweet mouth.

Then abruptly she flung her head back, drew her little figure up scornfully and blighted him with a flashing glance. Hatfield heard snickers in the direction of the table, saw Joe Hayes flush darkly.

For an instant Hayes' lips trembled. Then he dropped his eyes, his shoulders drooped, and he turned and slouched away into the crowd. Somebody laughed, the music blared forth afresh, and Escolita went on with her dance.

Again she paused for breath, laughing, sweeping her merry glance over the heads of the crowd.

Hatfield saw her stiffen, saw the red of her lips fade to the gray tinge of fear. Her eyes widened—great pools of dark light, fixed staring.

Hatfield, taller than any man near him and able to see over their heads, followed the girl's shrinking stare. In the door stood Henry Lyons, his dark face inscrutable as always. His gaze was fixed on the little dancer in an impersonal way, in it something, perhaps, of curiosity. Indifferently he turned away and began speaking to the man at his side.

Hatfield's gaze, swinging back to Escolita, saw the color bloom high in her cheeks once more. She laughed in a wild, reckless way, leaped from the table-top and danced merrily back to her dressing-room behind the velvet curtains.

The whole episode had taken but a fleeting moment of time, and the Ranger doubted if onyone other than himself had observed it.

"What scared her?" he mused. "Was it Lyons, or that husky, broken-nosed gent he was talking to? Lyons didn't seem to pay her no mind a-tall, but I'd swear she was looking straight at him. Well, one thing's shore for certain, the Hayes feller is plumb roped and hogtied!"

Leaning against the bar, sipping his drink, Hatfield watched the colorful scene. Occasionally he addressed a remark to the taciturn King, who answered with grunts or a terse comment.

BOTH being silent men, they got along well together. Hatfield was feeling a growing respect for the lean, saturnine deputy and discovering in him an unsuspected fund of dry humor and a shrewd insight into men and their motives, as revealed by his infrequent but pithy observations.

King suddenly jerked his thumb down the bar.

"See Joe Hayes and some his gang are shore takin' on a skinful," he said.

Hatfield glanced in that direction and placed the young ranch owner in the middle of a group of about his own age. His companions were reckless appearing young men with

roving eyes and assured air. All were drinking plenty, and Hayes, it appeared, more than anyone else.

Young Joe's face was flushed, his eye baleful. He downed a glass of raw whiskey as if it were water, and hammered on the bar for a refill. Hatfield studied the young rancher's companions, and abruptly his green eyes lost their warmth and seemed to subtly change color.

He turned to King and remarked in casual tones:

"Them fellers all ride for Hayes?"

"Most of 'em," grunted King. "Couple of 'em don't, I figger, that is unless he hired 'em recent for roundup work. That little dark hombre I ain't seen before. The tall jigger with the scar I've seen around with Joe once or twice. Name's Durade. I think he works for a spread over to the mouth of the valley. I seem to recollect that Henry Lyons fired him a while back over somethin' or other—too much drinkin' I reckon. Lyons is a serious sorta gent and sorta upright. Don't stand for much foolishment."

Hatfield continued to study the expressionless countenance of the tall man with Joe Hayes. He was ruddy of complexion save where the livid mark of a long scar showed from the temple to the left corner of his mouth. He appeared to be holding his liquor better than his companions and had little to say.

"Young Joe picks out a prime lot of hellions to associate with," King was saying. "If he keeps on the way he's been goin' for the past year, he's goin' to end up in somethin' bad or I'm a heap mistook. He owns a nice little spread, and has quite a interest in old Mike Shaw's mine, particular now that Bruce Ralston left him his holdin's.

"Then there's the Bowtie, which Joe is takin' over. That's the best spread in the valley. Ralston gettin' cashed in by the Injuns was a sort of a good thing for Joe, all right. Aside from Uncle Mike and mebbe old Train Beverly, I reckon Joe'll be about the best fixed gent in Mescalero Valley. That is if he don't drink or gamble it all away.

"Pity somebody can't get holt of him and straighten him out 'fore he goes plumb bad. I've a notion that gal Escolita could do it, but she shore treats Joe like dirt under her feet. The way he looks at her, I've thought once or twice he'd just naturally carry her off some night whether she wanted to go or not. He shore is sweet on her."

"How long has Escolita been dancin' here?" Hatfield asked.

"About a coupla months," King replied. "She come in here on the stage from Welch one day. First feller she met was Clate Dobson—spotted him for sheriff by his badge, I reckon. She steps right up to Clate and says

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IN

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in that soft voice of hers, 'What is the worst place in thees town where girls dance?'

"Well, Clate was so plumb flabbergasted he spoke right out without thinkin'. 'Well, ma'am,' says Clate, 'I reckon Ruby's up to the head of the street figgers to be.' *'Gracias,'* says the li'l lady and toddles right up to Ruby's, and Ruby hires her, and shore takes her under her wing."

JIM HATFIELD chuckled, but his eyes were somber, and the concentration furrow was deep between his black brows.

An argument was in progress down the bar. Joe Hayes appeared to be urging the scar-faced man to something, and the scar-faced man kept shaking his head. Finally, however, his objections appeared to be overcome. He nodded, reluctantly, and after another drink, the group noisily left the room.

A little later King announced his intention of returning to the office.

"Call may come in," he explained, "and it's hard to tell where Wagner is liable to be—celebratin' his new sheriff job in some eatin' house, the chances are."

Hatfield lingered at the bar a little longer, then also took his departure. He wandered from one saloon to another, drinking now and then, stopping once or twice to give a roulette wheel a few whirls. He was still seeking faces, and not finding them.

Once he remarked cryptically to himself:

"Wonder if there could be two gents in this part of the country with a half-moon sliced down the cheek?"

The night was well advanced when Hatfield wandered back to the neighborhood of Ruby's.

At the mouth of a dimly lighted alley which intersected the cross street just below the saloon he paused. Somewhere up the dark passage he heard the sound of an opening and closing door, and a quick tapping of light feet. Then his pulses leaped to the sound of a swift scuffle and a muffled scream.

It was a woman's voice!

CHAPTER XIV

Coyote Pack

INSTANTLY Jim Hatfield leaped into the alley and ran swiftly up it, hugging the walls of the buildings, where the shadow was deep. Directly ahead was a confused blotch of twisting solider shadows.

The Lone Wolf ran as silently as the gray wraith for which he had been named, but in the darkness he could not see the empty bottle someone had dropped in passing. His foot hit it and there was a sharp jangle of breaking glass.

"Look out!" somebody called hoarsely.

Then the woman's voice, instantly muffled:

"Help!"

Hatfield rushed the group. Flame flushed from the darkness and he felt the wind of the passing slug. But he dared not fire back for fear of hitting the woman.

A dark form loomed within arm's reach and he lashed out with all his strength. The impact of his fist on flesh and bone jarred his arm to the shoulder. There was a choking groan and the sound of a falling body.

He weaved sideward, struck at another shadow. A hand clutched his shoulder, a knife gleamed in a chance ray of light, and he felt its burn along his arm. With a back-handed blow he knocked the wielder sprawling.

He hurled a third man from him with a vicious twist of his wide shoulders, and as the group whirled about he saw the slight form of a girl struggling with a man who held her. Hatfield lunged for him. His fingers closed on a throat, and he put forth every atom of his great strength.

With a choking gasp the man let go the girl and clawed at his wrist with both hands. Hatfield reeled under a stunning blow from behind, struck out blindly with his free hand and felt his fist go home. He staggered back against the wall, red flashes storming before his eyes.

A little hand was thrust into his, gripping his finger, pulling, urging.

"Come!" shrilled a sweet voice. "Queeckly! They will recover—they will keel you! There may be others!"

Still half dazed by the blow on the back of his head, Hatfield stumbled obediently after his guide, who tugged and hauled, directing his dragging feet into a narrow opening between the two buildings. His shoulders brushed the walls on either side. He was hauled about, tugged into a second narrow passage that ran at right angles to the first.

A moment more and he stumbled against a step.

"Up three!" panted his companion. "Now the two more. And the three. Wait!"

Numbly obedient, fighting hard to retain his senses, Hatfield heard a key rattle in a lock. A door opened and he was urged forward. He heard the door close behind him and waited in black darkness.

A light flared, and revealed a neat, clean little room, plainly but comfortably furnished. Hatfield shook his head to clear it and stared about.

Standing before him, her chest heaving from her exertions, her dark eyes still wide with fear, but with a smile beginning to twitch at the corners of her red mouth, was the little dancer of Ruby's—Escolita!

"OH!" she exclaimed breathlessly. "You are the tall senior who watch Escolita dance on the table!"

Hatfield grinned. "Reckon there were quite a few gents watching yuh, so far as I can recollect," he replied.

"But I do not see them," the girl said. "I look over the heads, always, but your head I cannot look over."

Hatfield laughed outright at this naive remark. Then he abruptly sobered.

"Any chance of that outfit down there followin' yuh here?" he asked.

The girl's smile faded, but she shook her dark head.

"I do not think so," she replied. "Thees my room—where I live—and I came by the back way from the dance hall. Always I slip out and hurry here when my work is over. Nobody sees me."

"Seems as if somebody saw yuh tonight," Hatfield told her dryly.

Escolita again shook her head.

"No," she declared. "they do not see. They were waiting in the alley for someone, and see me when I come out the back door."

"Any notion who that somebody mighta been?" Hatfield asked her softly.

The little dancer lowered her eyes.

"I—I know not, for sure," she faltered.

"Ma'am," Hatfield said quietly, "it seems to me that somebody sorta wants yuh—wants yuh bad enough to grab yuh in the dark. Any notion who *that* is?"

The girl glanced up wildly. "No—no!" she declared passionately. "I tell you I know not!"

But Hatfield knew she lied. He shrugged his broad shoulders.

"All right, li'l lady," he told her. "If yuh won't, yuh won't. But I got a mite of good advice for yuh. Don't slip out the back way any more. Go out the front door, and stay in the light. Better still, always have somebody yuh can trust go with yuh. I might not happen along, and be lucky, next time."

"Lucky!" The girl caught hold of that word. "Lucky! Senor, you were—you say it how—superb! You were wonderful, and I—I thank you."

Hatfield regarded her gravely.

"Yuh can thank me best by followin' the advice I gave yuh," he replied. "Yuh're too nice a girl to have anything happen to."

Escolita smiled and dimpled. "You really think so?" she asked demurely, with downcast eyes.

"Uh-huh," Hatfield assured her, "and so do others, I figger. For instance, that good lookin' young feller who stood by the table while yuh danced."

The girl started as if struck and Hatfield saw her red lips quiver. Then she drew herself up haughtily.

"Of heem I prefer not to speak!" she said with icy emphasis.

"Huh?" wondered Hatfield. "Why yuh so on the prod against Joe Hayes?"

"Do not discuss heem!" she burst out passionately. "He is of—of the —the—the—he is one—I must not!"

SHE was sobbing now, crumpled down on a couch, her piquant little face buried in her slim, lovely hands. Hatfield leaned over and patted her soothingly on the shoulder.

"Come on, now — forget it," he urged. "Yuh've had a bad experience and yuh're all upset. Wash yore face and go to bed like a good girl. I'm leavin' now. Don't reckon yuh'll need any more help."

Escolita came off the couch in a lithe spring.

"Oh, I am horrid," she exclaimed contritely. "I have not really thanked you for what you did and . . . Oh! There is blood on your hand!"

"Just a knife scratch in the arm," Hatfield deprecated, trying to conceal the reddened member behind his back.

But Escolita showed she possessed a will of her own. Before he knew for sure what was happening, Hatfield found his sleeve rolled up and his sinewy left arm bared. The cut was little more than a graining of the skin by a sharp knife point, but Escolita insisted on bandaging it and applying a soothing ointment.

"You will come see me dance again?" she asked as Hatfield headed for the door.

"I expect so," he told her. "Chances are I'll drop into Ruby's again soon. By the way"—he stopped, his hand on the knob—"do yuh know a feller named Henry Lyons?"

The color drained from Escolita's expressive face.

"I have heard the name," she replied slowly. "Why—why do you ask?"

"Oh, I just saw him standin' in the door lookin' at yuh tonight," Hatfield answered carelessly. "Good night, ma'am."

But as he followed a corridor that led to front steps and a street that paralleled the one onto which Ruby's saloon fronted, he was musing: "Now what in blazes is this all about? Who were those hellions that ried to grab her in the alley? Bunch of jiggers out for a lark? Don't seem likely.

"What was that Neale King said about Joe Hayes lookin' at that girl as if he'd like to carry her off? Shore wish I'd got a good look at those fellers I tangled with, but I wasn't seein' over well after I got that thump on the head."

He felt tenderly of a sizeable lump that swelled under his hair.

"One thing's certain," he told Goldy a little later, as he made sure the sorrel was cared for properly, "that girl's sorta int'rested in young Joe, and plumb on the prod against him for some reason she ain't tellin'. And she's scared stiff of Henry Lyons. Plumb nice around here—Indian drums, night riders packin' dynamite, murders, torturin's, and a dancin' girl that knows plenty and won't talk."

Then he thought, with apparently utter irrelevance:

"Wonder how that scar-faced jigger, Durade, would look like with a nigh black complexion, and black hair instead of red?"

As Hatfield wearily sought his bed, he suddenly glanced up at the starry sky. Was that low mutter thunder from an unseen cloud? No, it was not thunder.

From somewhere in the direction of the black spire that was the Devil's Finger pulsed an angry roll and rumble of drums!

CHAPTER XV

Ranger Craft

DUST and sun! Purple haze shrouding the hilltops. A huge brassy ball high in the murky heavens blazed down on the white ribbon of the Chisos Trail, glancing from leaves that were already aflame with color.

Amid the wanton riot of autumn's scarlets and golds, the piñon pines and other evergreens were somberly dark, almost black. Crag and chimney and pinnacle were mellowed and

softened by the haze. But the white surface of the trail was hard and uncompromising, a-shimmer with heat waves, amid which the dust devils whirled and danced.

In great clouds the dust rolled up from beneath the grinding wheels of four huge freight wagons which lurched and rumbled up the trail. To each wagon was attached eight straining mules, and on the high seat perched a sweating, swearing teamster who whirled his eighteen-foot lash about his head, sent the multiple thongs singing and crackling over the backs of the mules and threatened them with destruction dire and dreadful.

The wagons were heavily loaded, heaped high with ponderous packing-cases. Upon the rough boards of the cases were stenciled in large black letters:

AUSTIN HYDRAULIC MINING MACHINERY CO.

The brassy sun reached the zenith, began to drop down the long slant of the western sky, shining obliquely through the haze. The light assumed a reddish hue which stained the dust clouds as would a blown mist of blood.

The teamsters wiped their sweating faces with bared forearms. They cursed the dust, the sun, the mules, earth, eternity, life itself.

They were alert, watchful men, those teamsters. Their eyes roved over the trail ahead, scanned the distant wall of stone across the deep gorge whose nether lip the trail hugged.

Much of their attention was directed toward the steep, brush-covered slope which swelled upward from the dusty trail. Now and then they cast glances into the dark depths of the gorge, the brush-covered floor of which was hundreds of feet from the overhanging lip of the trail. They were armed with gun and knife and had the air of men who knew how to use both.

Up and up wound the trail, with the awful drop of hundreds of feet of nothing at all on one side and the swelling, brush-covered slope on the other. The mules were nervous, jumpy, with pricking ears and switching tails. They seemed to sense events in the making.

The nervousness was communicated to the drivers. They glanced over their shoulders, studied the slopes ahead, their watchfulness redoubled. But just the same they were utterly unprepared for what happened.

Without the slightest warning, the dark, silent slope ahead awoke to tumultuous life. A wavering line of pale flame flickered along the straggle of brush. There was a staccato crackling, then the shrill whine of passing lead.

A mule of the leading team went down, kicking and squealing. Another sprawled over its body. Instantly, where there had been efficient order, was pandemonium. The mules bucked and squealed, rearing back, plunging in their harness.

THE huge wagon slewed around, its rear end crashing against the slope. The driver, yelling with terror, dropped the reins and leaped from the high seat. Madly he fled down the dusty trail as a second ragged volley crashed from the brush.

His companions tumbled from their perches and pounded in his wake. They rounded a bend, dived into the growth and went scrambling up the slope. Soon they were hidden by the tall brush, snugged beneath bushes, peering with wide eyes at the happenings on the trail below.

One, a big Irishman with flaming red hair and a truculent blue eye, pulled his gun from its sheath. A companion snatched it from his hand.

"Lay low, yuh fool!" he hissed. "One shot and yuh'll bring the whole band onto us. We can't fight twenty armed Injuns! Look at 'em come skulkin' outa the brush. There's more'n twenty, and they're still comin'!"

"Them devils is full-blood Yaquis!" another teamster said in a hoarse whisper. "Look the way their hair is hangin' over their eyes. If they come lookin' for us we're good as scalped

and chopped up right now."

"They won't come," replied the man who snatched the Irishman's gun. "They'll know we're holed-up in the brush somewhere if we ain't hightailin' it down the trail, and it wouldn't pay 'em to try and root out four jiggers with guns. They're after the loads, that's all. Look at the scuts shovin' them cases over the edge into that canyon!"

The dark-faced, buckskin-clad raiders had swarmed from cover and into the trail. While some, with ready rifles, scanned the slope and the downtrail, the others hauled the big cases from the wagons, straining and grunting with effort, and hurled them into the dark depths of the gorge. The crash of their striking the rocks hundreds of feet below sent echoes pounding along the opposite wall.

"This is a crazy business makin' this trip, anyhow," grumbled the big Irishman. "We'll be lucky to get out of it with our hair."

His companion jingled coins in his pocket.

"We got paid good for it, didn't we, and in advance?" he demanded. "Me, I'm gonna have me a high old time in Coma tonight. Worth takin' a little chance for."

"There goes the last case," grunted the Irishman, "and there go the spalpeens up the trail. Look, there's others leadin' horses outa the brush! Begorry, they didn't take the mules or shoot 'em!"

"'Course they didn't," grunted another. "They don't need mules, and even a Injun is leary of murderin' hoss critters for nothin'. . . . There they go, ridin' away. We've seen the last of 'em. What you fellers goin' to do? Me, I'm catchin' me a mule and ridin' to Coma."

"Begorry, and I'll go with yez," declared the Irishman. "I started for there and I won't let any Injun keep me from afther goin' to where I started."

The other two teamsters decided to ride back to Welch, taking the empty wagons with them. The two lead mules were freed of harness and shoved into the canyon. . . .

Dusk was falling when the two teamsters flogged their weary mounts into Coma and reported what had happened. Uncle Mike Shaw cursed them and everything else.

"Where's Hatfield?" he demanded. "Harper, find him and bring him here."

An hour later, however, Ted Harper, the foreman, returned alone.

"Scoured the whole blamed town," he reported. "Can't find hide or hair of him. Seems he was last seen ridin' out of town last night with that deputy sheriff, Neale King."

UNCLE MIKE swore some more. Harper departed to attend to his multiple duties. A few minutes later Joe Hayes stormed in.

"What'd I tell yuh!" he shouted, his face dark with anger. "Didn't I say this was all foolishness! Didn't I tell yuh that slick jigger Hatfield was a maverick? All that expensive machinery gone to glory! Thousands of dollars wasted! For what?"

It was typical of peppery old Mike Shaw that when he faced an angry man, he himself grew cooler. He fixed Hayes with his filmy blue eye and spoke quietly, but with finality.

"I'm still runnin' *Escondida,*" was all he said.

Hayes' face twisted into a sneer.

"Yeah? I reckon yuh are—for awhile, anyhow. Yeah, I know yuh own a controllin' interest, but listen! I'm soon gonna own enough of this shebang to rate a sayin' as to how the money's spent. I done had a talk with Lawyer Hutchinson and he told me I'll be able to get a minority stockholder's court order for an accountin' as to what's done with the money comin' outa *Escondida.* I'll own enough to be entitled to a say."

Uncle Mike stared at him. "Yuh done gone loco?" he demanded. "What the blue blazes are yuh talkin' about?"

"What'm I talkin' about?" purred Hayes. "Just this. Clate Dobson owned a hefty holdin' in these diggin's, didn't he? Well, Clate left a will. That will was drawed in favor of Bruce Ralston and his heirs. Lawyer Hutchinson says they ain't no

doubt about it I'll get what Dobson left. Then we'll see!"

He stalked out, leaving Uncle Mike staring at the wall. For a long time the old man sat silent in his chair. Then he spoke, as to someone across the table:

"Hmmm! Looks like Bruce and pore old Clate gettin' cashed in turned out mighty profitable to Joe Hayes. . . ."

The two teamsters who had gone on to Welch with the empty wagons rumbled into town shortly after sunset. With many gestures and much profanity they told their story. Then they unhitched their exhausted mules and sought food and rest.

And as the dark closed down, a second caravan of big wagons rolled out of Welch and climbed the Chisos Trail. This time there were eight of them, all heaped high with ponderous packing-cases, upon the sides of which there was no stenciling.

Before and beside and behind them rode armed men, alert, watchful. Heading them was Neale King, the taciturn deputy sheriff. Beside him rode Jim Hatfield. . . .

IT was Hatfield who first reached the *Escondida* Building early the following morning. He was some distance in advance of the rumbling wagon train.

Early as it was, Uncle Mike Shaw was already at his desk. His old face was lined and weary, but he bounced up, bristling, as Hatfield entered the office.

"Where in all tarnation *you* been?" he demanded. "Did yuh hear what happened? All our hydraulic machinery is at the bottom of Talkin' Water Canyon!"

Hatfield stemmed the tirade with a gesture.

"Nope," he said soberly. "Nope, that isn't machinery at the botton of Talkin' Water Canyon. That's just some boxes of rocks and scrap iron. I figgered a certain bunch we know somethin' about might try somethin' like that, and I sorta put one over on 'em.

"Yuh see, I couldn't very well ask for a sheriff's posse to guard that shipment from Welch to here just 'cause I had a hunch. Wagner wouldn't have given me one, and King couldn't go over his boss' head without somethin' definite to act on.

"King sorta conveniently happened to be in Welch when those teamsters brought their empty wagons back though. And naturally he felt sorta justified in swearin' in a posse right off and headin' back with us to Coma."

"But the machinery?" demanded Uncle Mike. "Where in all tarnation time is the machinery?"

Hatfield gestured through the open window, toward where the wagon train was turning off the trail and approaching the emplacements that had been prepared for the hydraulic giants.

"There's yore machinery," he said quietly. "All safe and ready to set up. It'll be operating in less'n a week."

Several busy days followed for Jim Hatfield, during the course of which he supervised the unloading and erecting of the hydraulic machinery. He did find time to ascertain that the canyon through which ran the ancient road really did provide a short-cut to the Mexican border. But the canyon opened out before it reached the Line. The road was lost in the shifting sands of a strip of desert.

There was no way of telling where the marauders might have crossed the river. No telling even if they had continued to the Border, or had turned toward some other objective before reaching it.

Once or twice the Ranger saw the scar-faced man, Durade, in the company of young Joe Hayes, and he felt sure that the pair were covertly observing him and discussing him. Of the dark-skinned faces he sought he saw nothing.

Nearly two weeks had passed since his visit to Ruby's when he again entered the garish saloon about midnight. As he passed through the swinging doors, Escolita swirled onto the floor to do her specialty dance.

Escolita was the same in her youth and loveliness. But this time her dance was different. It was wilder, rife with a subtle lure. Hatfield noted

that the girl's face was unwontedly flushed.

He noted, too, that instead of keeping her gaze fixed above the heads of her audience, she met glances boldly, her black eyes narrowing, the red shadows in their depths flaring to the surface. Hatfield sensed a studied effort to inflame, to excite the emotions of the men who crowded about the dance floor and clapped and cheered.

The dance ended, but Escolita did not swirl back through the red velvet curtains. Hatfield saw her mingle with the other dancers on the floor, a drunken cowboy's arm about her trim waist. He caught snatches of remarks from the men at the bar, heard derisive laughter.

He saw young Joe Hayes, his face haggard, his eyes burning, staring after the dancing girl. Hayes took a step in her direction, but the scar-faced Durade gripped his shoulder with cruel fingers, swung him about, spat words into his ear.

Hayes growled and muttered, but permitted Durade to shove him through the swinging doors. The darkness swallowed the pair.

Hatfield gazed after them, a speculative light in his green eyes, the concentration furrow deepening between his brows. His glance shifted back to Escolita, and the speculative light intensified. He turned at a touch.

Ruby was standing beside him. She looked older than on his previous visit, and in her fine eyes was a new look of uncertainty. Hatfield felt the hand on his arm shake. She, too, was staring at the dancing girl.

"I—I don't know what's come over her," she said, a break in her throaty voice. "She—she's changed. She's took to drinking—she never did that before. Tonight, when I tried to talk to her in her dressing room, she—she slapped me, flung me off, refused to listen."

She turned to the Ranger, and now there was stark misery in her eyes.

"Hatfield," she said, her voice almost a whisper, "Hatfield, it's the very devil to love something, and watch that something go to the dogs! To see that something, good and sweet and pure, become what—what *I* am! I believe I'm going crazy! I—I believe I'm going to—to commit murder!"

Hatfield looked at the woman with the haunting ghost of dead beauty still on her face. He sensed what she once was, understood her love for the girl who was still what *she* once had been. His level gaze held her, dominated her.

"Wait," he said quietly. "Things aren't always what they look to be. Wait."

Ruby bent a long searching glance upon his face. She drew a deep quivering breath.

"Yes," she said, "I'll wait."

Hatfield finished his drink and left the saloon.

CHAPTER XVI

The Tightening Loop

THE turbulent hours passed in Ruby's saloon. Escolita finished her last dance, changed to her simple street costume.

But she did not slip out the back door. She walked through the crowd to the street, head held high, glancing to right and left, her lips smiling, her slim hips swaying.

As she passed through the swinging doors, more than one man moved as if to follow her. But she went so swiftly that she had whisked around the corner in an instant.

Reaching the side street she ran, swift and lithe as a deer. She turned another corner and a moment later tripped lightly up the steps that lead to her room. She turned into the corridor, at the far end of which a light burned dimly. She approached her door, and the tall figure of a man stepped from the shadows and confronted her.

Escolita gasped, shrank back, one hand pressed tightly against her red lips.

The man was Jim Hatfield!

For a trembling moment, the little dancer stared at Hatfield. He held her eyes with his level gaze, motion-

less, not speaking. Finally he gestured to the key she held in the hand pressed to her mouth.

"Suppose we go inside," he said quietly.

Escolita hesitated, but his eyes dominated, compelled her. Obediently she unlocked the door, and entered the room, with Hatfield behind her. He waited until she had lighted the lamp, then closed the door and stood with his back against it.

His eyes had never left her. They were steady, grave, but not unkind. The girl trembled, stared back at him, fascinated.

"Well, senorita," he said in his deep, drawling voice, "what's the idea of sendin' yoreself to perdition, just to get even with somebody?"

The girl shrank back from him as if he had struck her. She stared, her eyes widening with something akin to terror.

"Wh-what do you mean?" she gasped.

"I mean," Hatfield said, "that yuh're deliberately settin' out to be revenged on somebody, no matter what happens to yoreself in the process. What's the idea? And who is it?"

Escolita shrank back still farther. She dropped on the couch, covered her face with her hands. Her shoulders shook with a wild, uncontrolled sobbing. Suddenly she looked up, her eyes wild, burning.

"You are right!" she cried. "I *will* be revenged! I'll drag his proud name in the dust. Wait! Wait until I tell everybody in thees terrible town who I am—my name. I, who bear his name, dancing in the vilest place in thees vile town, laughed at, leered at. Already I am talked about. Already men are beginning to wonder.

"Even she—Ruby, my *amigo*—is not sure. Men talk of Escolita. Soon they will talk of another name. What do I care what happens to me? I hate him! I will have my revenge. He deserted my mother, broke her heart. She died of a broken heart.

"He has sunk low—lower than even I thought possible. He is friend to those he should hate. But he had pride—pride in his old and honored name. Through that pride I shall strike. I will have my revenge!"

JIM HATFIELD understood the Latin mind, the Latin temperament. He understood the scorching pride of fiery Spanish blood, the capacity for hate, the undying desire for vengeance for wrong done. He knew that under the wild, incoherent words of the girl was a terrible fixed purpose. She meant what she said.

Only Spanish blood and Spanish heritage could conceive this subtle scheme of vengeance. Only Spanish tradition and way of thinking could fully understand and appreciate its strength.

"Uh-huh—and ruin yourself complete gettin' yore revenge," he replied to her last frantic declaration.

She stared up at him defiantly.

"And send others there at the same time!" he continued.

"Others?"

"Yes," Hatfield pursued remorselessly. "Young Joe Hayes for one. He's makin' a fast trip. And Ruby—Ruby's already there, but you mighta pulled her back."

The girl's lips were white, her eyes great pools of horror.

"No—no!" she whispered.

Hatfield leaned forward, held her with his eyes.

"Tell me," he said softly. "Tell me his name—his real name."

For a moment her glance met his, then her eyes dropped and she stared dully at the floor. Slowly she shook her head from side to side. Hatfield gazed at her for a moment, recognized the futility of argument, and left the room.

Outside in the street he paused and stared up at the stars paling in the first flush of dawn.

"I gotta work fast!" he muttered. "There's still loose ends bangin' about, and they've got to be tied up fast. That feller is smart, almighty smart. He'd slip through a loose loop like a greased yearlin'. I gotta tighten my rope, and I haven't got much time."

Hatfield went back to Ruby's for a nightcap before turning in. The dance floor was deserted, the crowd at

the bar gradually thinning out.

He found a poker game in progress at a table near the end of the bar. The players were Sheriff Walt Wagner, Henry Lyons, the scar-faced Durade, Joe Hayes and a couple of lean men in cowboy dress whose faces were unfamiliar.

The stakes were evidently high, and the intent players vouchsafed Hatfield hardly a glance. He leaned against the bar, toying with his drink, and watched the game.

Joe Hayes was losing, Hatfield sensed. The young ranch owner's face was flushed, his eyes red from drink and lack of sleep. He peered at his cards in a scowling way and made frequent nervous gestures.

The set of his coat seemed to annoy him and he shoved the left lapel back with a petulant sweep of his hand. As the coat fell back for a moment, Hatfield caught a dull gleam of metal.

The Ranger's eyes narrowed slightly and he regarded Hayes thoughtfully. Joe Hayes wore a heavy belt gun slung low on his left hip, the butt turned to the front, the mark of a cross-draw man. But Hatfield now knew that Hayes also wore a shoulder holster.

Hayes continued his fidgeting. His moving and jostling appeared to irritate the quiet Lyons. He said something sharply to the young man and struck the table with his hand. The sound seemed hard, metallic, yet his hand was empty.

HATFIELD'S eyes narrowed still more.

"And that jigger's got a gun up his sleeve," he muttered soundlessly. "Derringer, probably. And *he's* wearing a belt gun, too. What an outfit! Heeled and double-heeled, and watchin' each other like hawks."

Lyons' coat was brushed back, revealing the big gun in its scabbard. A section of the heavy cartridge belt was also revealed. Hatfield scanned the gun idly, frowning a little at the smooth ivory handle of the six. The Lone Wolf was prejudiced against pearl and ivory handles.

"Too slick," was his verdict about such guns. "Liable to turn in the hand. And they catch the light at night, too, and give the other jigger something to shoot at."

His gaze shifted along the gleaming rims of the cartridges in Lyons' belt loops. Suddenly something peculiar about those belt loops attracted his attention. He stared at them intently. Then he abruptly finished his drink, placed the empty glass on the bar and sauntered across to the little sandwich counter, passing so close to Lyons' chair as to almost brush against him.

He did not pause, but his keen glance focused on the belt loops, missing no slightest detail of their construction. He ordered a sandwich at the counter, raised it to his mouth with a steady hand. But in the shadow of his wide hat, his long, black-lashed eyes seemed a-crawl with green fires. . . .

* * *

The installation of the hydraulic machinery was completed. The huge brass nozzles on their ball joints, which permitted horizontal and vertical play, stood like gleaming cannon, their muzzles directed at the towering gravel bank of the mountain side.

On each platform stood men whom Hatfield had carefully instructed in the operation of the metal monsters. Other workmen clustered nearby, tense, interested, waiting for the Lone Wolf to give the word.

The dam in the canyon was finished, as was the long covered flume of massive timbers.

It appeared that all of Coma and Mescalero Valley were present for the beginning of operations. In the forefront stood, among others, young Joe Hayes, his face flushed, his eyes bloodshot.

Beside him, lean, lounging, passive with the deadly passiveness of an unsheathed rapier, was the tall man with the scarred face. Durade, Hayes' constant companion.

Henry Lyons, dark, impassive, stood a little apart with Sheriff Walt Wagner. It seemed to Hatfield that in Lyons' dark, inscrutable eyes was an expression of sardonic amusement. Hatfield wondered, a trifle uneasily.

He hesitated to give the word to begin operations, experiencing a nameless feeling of disquietude. Everything, he felt sure, was as it should be. Everything was in perfect working order. Nothing had been overlooked.

He cast a last searching glance over the hydraulic equipment, and as he did so, he permitted himself a covert chuckle.

"Just what in all creation am I—an engineer or a Ranger?" he asked himself with amusement. "I figgered to come over to this section as a Ranger, but things appear to have got sorta scrambled." His face set in grim lines. "I took the right track, though," he congratulated himself. "Just another thread or two, and the loose ends are tied up. I'm mighty nigh ready to risk the final play. Mighty nigh ready."

WITH a shrug of his broad shoulders he abruptly faced about, grasped a lever with his powerful hand. The men at the nozzles stiffened alertly, gripped their controls.

Hatfield threw the master lever which turned the mighty head of water into the lead lines. The men at the nozzles moved.

With a hissing roar, eight-inch streams of water shot from the giants, striking the gravel bank with a shattering crash. Clouds of dust arose, instantly beaten down beneath showers of rainbowed spray. Torrents of muddy water cascaded down the slope, choked with gravel and earth, swirling their burden toward the waiting sluice boxes.

The assembled crowd gave a rousing cheer.

For several minutes Hatfield let the huge jets of water roar and storm. Then he signaled to the nozzlemen, who closed their throttles. The roar subsided, stilled. The ensuing silence was almost painful.

"Reckon she works, eh, gents?" shouted old Mike Shaw, his wrinkled face beaming.

The tall Durade said something to young Joe Hayes. The pair turned their gaze full upon Hatfield. Hayes' face twisted into a sneer. He laughed jeeringly, an offensive, personal note in his sardonic mirth.

Jim Hatfield's eyes suddenly blazed green fire. Two long strides and he had reached Hayes. His sinewy hand shot out, gripped the ranch owner by the throat. Clean off his feet he lifted the heavy man, and shook him as a wolf shakes a rat.

"Hayes, I've stood all from you I'm gonna stand," he said, his voice cold as steel grinding on ice. "Yuh're nothin' but a spoiled brat, a good-for-nothin' guzzler, a worthless bawlbeller profitin' from the work of better men. If I hear anything more outa yuh, I'm gonna tie yuh in a double bowknot and ram yuh down yore own throat!"

With a final shake that rattled the man's teeth like castanets, he flung Hayes from him. Young Joe sprawled on his face in the muddy gravel, ploughed up several yards of it, rolled over and lay gasping, a sight to gaze upon.

"Look out!" howled Uncle Mike Shaw.

But Hatfield had already seen, from the corner of his eye. He leaped sideward with pantherish grace, ducked under the whizzing knife Durade had drawn, and knocked Durade half a dozen yards straight through the air. Durade lay where he fell, his bloody face buried in the mud.

Hatfield swept the frozen crowd with a bleak glare that was like a glacial wind. For a tense instant he stood lance-straight, towering, commanding, thumbs hooked over double cartridge belts, slim, deadly hands scant inches from the flaring butts of the big black guns. Then he relaxed, dropped his hands, and spoke in his normally soft and drawling voice.

"Well, I reckon that'll be about all."

There was silence. Young Joe Hayes got painfully to his feet, wiped the blood and mud from his face, stared at the tall Ranger. Suddenly his face broke into a grin that was almost boyish. He looked Hatfield squarely in the eye. He spoke, and his voice was hearty, respectful, and

completely devoid of malice.

"Uh-huh, big feller, I reckon yuh're right. I reckon that *is* about all!"

Squaring his shoulders, and without a glance at the unconscious Durade, he turned and strode sturdily down the slope toward Coma. Jim Hatfield gazed after him, and his bleak, strangely colored eyes were suddenly all kindness.

CHAPTER XVII

Disaster

WHILE busy days came and went, the hurtling streams of water tore fiercely into the towering slope, bringing down untold tons of earth and gravel. Old Mike exultingly reported that the sluice boxes were already showing gold.

Hatfield felt that he could safely turn over to Ted Harper this job that had unexpectedly been placed upon his own broad shoulders. He was almost ready to act on the business that actually has brought him to Mescalero Valley, but not quite. The master thread of his close-drawn web still eluded him—that master thread of motivation which was all-important, without which, firm in his grasp, he dared not take the final step.

"That feller is smooth," he repeated to himself. "Smooth and deadly. It'll take a plumb tight noose to hold him."

And ever the baleful, flaming ray that reflected from the polished surface of the Devil's Finger dropped lower and lower over Mescalero Valley, until the red lance of light seemed barely to clear the tree tops of the slope.

Hatfield had not been to town for two days. He had eaten and slept at the scene of operations, sharing a hastily constructed bunkhouse with men who constantly attended the machinery.

Late the third night he entered Ruby's. Ruby herself saw him the moment he passed through the swinging doors, and hurriedly joined him at the bar. Her face was stained, there were new lines visible, and the circles under her blue eyes were darker.

"Something terrible happened last night, Hatfield," she told the Ranger. "This town is getting even my nerve."

"How's that?" Hatfield questioned.

Ruby looked hurriedly about, moved a little farther down the bar, to an unoccupied space, and spoke in low tones.

"Last night, just before she was going on for her last dance," she said, "Escolita discovered that the heel of one of her slippers was cracked. One of my girls, the little redhead they call Flame, offered to go to Escolita's room and get another pair. She slipped out the back way, and when she didn't return, I sent a swamper over to Escolita's room to find out why. He found out!"

Ruby shuddered, and her rich voice choked in her throat.

"Yes?" Hatfield prompted quietly.

"He found Flame—in the hallway—dead," Ruby said with apparent difficulty. "She'd been stabbed!"

Hatfield regarded her a moment, his eyes coldly gray.

"Ruby," he said at length, "yuh still got some influence over Escolita, haven't yuh?"

"Yes—some," she said hesitantly.

"I want yuh to use it," Hatfield told her. "Use every bit of it to keep Escolita with yuh, day and night—every minute."

Ruby stared at him, her eyes dilating with horror.

"You—you mean that knife was meant for—was meant for—"

"Yes," Hatfield finished the sentence for her, "it was meant for Escolita. Can yuh keep her with yuh?"

The golden woman was suddenly transformed. The air of hesitation, of uncertainty, left her. She straightened, and her blue eyes burned. Once again she was the Ruby who ruled men, who with her white hand quelled trouble in the toughest joint in a tough cattle town before it got fairly under way.

"I'll keep her!" she promised between set teeth. "I'll keep her if I

have to break that white neck of hers!"

IT WAS late when Hatfield got back to the camp. Thoroughly weary, he went to bed and almost instantly fell asleep.

He awoke with a start. The first gray light of dawn was stealing through the windows. His ears still rang to a distant roaring explosion followed by rumbles and crashes, which swiftly died to silence.

Other men were sitting up in their bunks, asking questions, making exclamations. Outside sounded a sudden shouting, a dwindling of the hiss and roar of the giants worked by the night force.

Hatfield leaped from his bunk and began dressing with swift efficiency. Boots pounded outside, the door was flung open. An excited man peered through the gloom, spotted Hatfield.

"Boss," he shouted, "the water's stopped comin' down the flume, and there was one gosh-awful racket up toward the canyon a minute ago. It .... Listen!"

From far up the darkling slope of the mountain sounded a throb and mutter that swelled to a triumphant roll and died away.

"Drums!" exploded the man. "Injun drums! Them red devils have raised some new devilment, or my name's not Casey!"

Hatfield kept Goldy near him at the camp, sheltered under a lean-to. Now he saddled and bridled the big sorrel at lightning speed.

"Bring the gang after me, with guns!" he ordered Ted Harper, and galloped away in the direction of the canyon.

It was broad daylight when Hatfield reached the canyon. There he found a scene of wild destruction. The dam and the flume were buried beneath thousands of tons of stone which choked the canyon to a height of many feet. The cliffs on either side showed colossal shatterings. They had been rent and riven by terrific explosions of dynamite.

Hatfield's face was bleak, set like iron. He stared at the jumbled ruin, visioning that blazing explosion in the canyon through which ran the ancient road of the Mexican gold seekers of long ago.

"So that's what they were packin' dynamite over this way for, and not buyin' it in Coma!" flashed into his mind. "They mined the cliffs with charges, waited until the construction was all finished and things looked fine, then set it off. Well, it shore looks like somebody don't want Uncle Mike Shaw to make money out of the *Escondida* mine. I've got a hunch I can name the somebody, too—even if I can't prove it yet. But in the name of all the blue blazes—why!"

All day long the Ranger searched the canyon for clues to the marauders, examined the destruction wrought, estimated the extent of the damage. Late in the day at the *Escondida* Building, Uncle Mike Shaw received his discouraging report with dull apathy.

"Looks like things is sorta finished," Uncle Mike admitted. "I ain't got the money to clean up that mess and build new dams and flumes, and I doubt if I can get it outa the mine. The tunnel workins' are barely payin' expenses now. Anyhow after this happenin', I figger I won't be able to have the full say as to what's done with the mine money. Joe Hayes owns a hefty holdin' now. He seems to have sorta improved some since yuh walloped the daylights outa him, ain't drinkin' so much and ain't runnin' around so much with that snaky Frank Durade. But he's stubborn as a young mule and I figger I won't be able to swing him into my line of thinkin'."

THERE was nothing Hatfield could say, at the moment. A silence ensued. Together they stood in front of the mine building staring up the slope toward where the Devil's Finger glowered balefully in the red light of the setting sun.

"Look," old Mike suddenly exclaimed. "Look, Hatfield, and you'll see how I come to find *Escondida*. It's got to the time of the year when the sun's swung around so's the last light

from it slants up and hits the curved under-side of the Finger. Instead of shootin' a ray across the valley, it beats right down onto the slope in line with the mine mouth. Watch, now!"

Hatfield fixed his gaze on the baleful finger of stone. Suddenly from the curved surface a fierce red ray shot downward at a sharp angle. Squarely upon the growth-covered slope it beat.

The thorny Coma brush seemed to leap into the living flame. Every twig and berry stood out clear and distinct, and through the straggle showed glimpses of a beetling cliff a score or more of yards in height, to which the growth clung raggedly.

"Watch, now," repeated Uncle Mike. "In a minute it'll start crawlin' down the slope toward the mine mouth."

Before the mind's eye of Jim Hatfield suddenly blazed words from the dying message penned by old Fernando de Castro many, many years ago:

. . . The treasure is there—where the red ray falls. . . . The wealth shall lie hidden and the mine will remain indeed *La Mina Escondida!*

"The treasure *and* the mine!" the Ranger muttered. "He kept writin' about 'em like they were two different things. Hmm! 'Where the red ray falls!'"

Uncle Mike glanced up. "Eh?" he questioned, bewildered.

Hatfield came out of his absorption with a start. He shot staccato sentences at the old man.

"Quick—pencil and paper! Don't ask questions—quick! I can't take my eyes off it!"

Gurgling amazed profanity, Uncle Mike hurried to obey. Hatfield, his intent gaze never leaving the spot where the red ray focused, seized them from him.

With swift, skillful fingers he began making a sketch as the ominous red light started to move down the slope. With the eye of the trained engineer and the uncannily gifted plainsman, he measured heights and distances, estimated the angles of declination and ascent, the length of the base of the giant triangle formed by the Devil's Finger, the ray and the slope.

"Got it!" he exclaimed exultantly. "Uncle Mike, it's a hunch—nothing much more—but it's a hunch that ties up mighty nice with some loose ends. It's a hunch that says yuh're mighty soon goin' to be sittin' on top of the heap, and I'm goin' to take a long ride!"

THE following day, Jim Hatfield and Uncle Mike Shaw rode up the Chisos Trail. The track was empty when they cut away from it at the head of the slope and they felt sure they were not observed. They splashed through the little stream, climbed the rise of the shallow plateau and reached the middle of the great wall or rock that was the Finger.

Uncle Mike stared at the Spanish inscription chiseled in the stone, and swore weakly. But, like Hatfield, he understood and appreciated the deadly threat, the sinister purpose embodied in the vainglorious wordage.

Hatfield rode to the lip of the plateau. He drew forth the sketch he had made and studied it thoughtfully.

"Directly in line with where we are, and an eighth of a mile or so down the slope," he announced.

Uncle Mike scanned the steep, brush-clothed, boulder-strewn and broken slope with the eye of a prospector thoroughly familiar with such a terrain.

"Don't think the hosses can make it," he decided. "I reckon it'll be shanks' mare from here on for us."

Hatfield nodded agreement. Always solicitous of his horse's welfare, he dismounted and led Goldy and old Mike's cayuse through the brush until he reached where the little stream diagonalled down the slope.

After some search, he found a little clearing on the near bank, grass-grown, hemmed in by tall, thick growth. He removed the rigs from the horses, and hobbled Shaw's mount. Goldy, he knew, would not stray. Here the animals were pro-

vided with water and grazing. They would be comfortable and hidden from view.

As an afterthought, he detached his sixty-foot lariat and took it along with him. It might come in handy during the scramble down the steep slope.

The descent proved to be irritating and painful because of the thorns and the sharp stones. But it was not particularly difficult until, near the end of the distance Hatfield had estimated, they paused on the lip of a steeply sloping wall of shattered rock. Uncle Mike shook his dead dubiously.

"If we get outa this without busted necks, we'll be almighty lucky," he declared.

The edges, the irregularity of the cliff face and the stout coma trees that sprouted from every crevice made the scramble to the bench below less difficult than they anticipated. Scratched and bleeding, and nursing bruises, they finally made it and paused on the flat surface of the bench to catch their breath.

Hatfield again consulted his drawing.

"Right about here is where I figger the ray focused," he said. "Now let's go over this section and see if we can find signs of anything buried or hidden."

They went over the ground, every foot of it, ranging far to the right and to the left against the chance of error in the drawing or Hatfield's calculations. They searched thoroughly and found—nothing.

CHAPTER XVIII

Murderer's Gold

NOON came and went, more hours passed, and the sun slanted down the western sky. Still the Ranger and Uncle Mike Shaw persisted. Finally they joined company at the spot where Hatfield maintained the fiery ray had focused.

Uncle Mike wagged his grizzled head pessimistically.

"Looks like we're nosin' a cold trail, son," he declared. "Reckon the old don was sorta flighty when he wrote that message. Reckon that accounts for the funny way it was worded. I'm scared the *Escondida* Mine was the only treasure he was talkin' about. There shore ain't no sign of anything bein' buried hereabouts, or any hole in the ground where it mighta been hid. The brush might hide a mound or markin' from anybody lookin' down from above or up from down below, but when you get down close to the stems like we are, it's easy to see it don't hide nothin'."

Hatfield did not reply. His keen gaze was roving back and forth across the terrain they had so painstakingly examined. He was probing, analyzing, taking into consideration every blotch or seam in the cliff face, the position of every tuft of brush growing from crack or crevice.

Suddenly his glance fixed on the sloping wall a score or so of yards to the right of where they had scrambled down it. Clumps of brush dotted its surface, but much of the stone was in plain view. Now that the low-lying sun was casting its rays full upon the surface, he noted something heretofore overlooked.

The face of the cliff seemed at this point to step forward slightly. There was no break apparent in the irregular wall, but Hatfield was sure it was no optical illusion. He turned and scrambled swiftly toward the spot, Uncle Mike trudging along some distance behind, muttering disconsolately in his whiskers.

Hatfield reached the spot opposite the formation that had excited his interest. He scrambled up the slope until he was close to the wall of rock. Suddenly he gave an exultant shout.

"What yuh found, son?" demanded Uncle Mike, clawing and skittering through the brush.

"Look!" Hatfield exclaimed. "No wonder we overlooked it. A man could pass within five feet of the cliff and never notice it. See—the rock folds back on itself like a double creased sheet of paper."

Puffing with effort and excitement, Uncle Mike joined him. Together they stood peering into a narrow crack that split the face of the cliff at so sharp an angle as to almost parallel the outer surface.

That slight stepping forward of the rock wall to the right was the only visible clue to its existence. And, as Hatfield had declared, it was practically unnoticeable even to a person passing along the foot of the cliff.

Together they entered the crack, followed it for a score of passes, the light swiftly growing fainter. Abruptly the narrow passage turned at practically right angles. They faced into a black cave mouth from which exuded a chill, clammy breath.

UNCLE MIKE SHAW hung back. "Son," he remarked dubiously, "do yuh shore enough figger there might be somethin' worthwhile in that hole? Looks mighty dark and lonesome to me."

Hatfield smiled. "I'm still follering a hunch," he said. "Let's go back outside a minute 'fore we crawl in any farther."

A little distance from the crevice was a gulley, with its sides covered with flowering weeds. There was an abundance of dry sotol stalks in evidence and Hatfield gathered an armful of convenient lengths. He knew they made excellent torches.

"All right," he told Uncle Mike, who had likewise provided himself with stalks. "We'll be able to see where we're goin', anyhow. Hit the trail, pardner!"

Together they reentered the black mouth of the cave. The flame of the torch Hatfield carried revealed smooth, glistening walls and a dense arch of rock a few feet above their heads. The floor of the cave, sloping gently downward, was littered with boulders of various sizes, and was rough and uneven.

For more than an hour they followed the turns and twists of the passage. Always the slope was downward, gentle but persistent, until Hatfield knew that they were deep down in the bowels of the mountain. The air was dank, but fresh enough, and there was a steady, unnatural draft that bent the flame of the torch inward as they progressed.

They rounded a turn. The walls of the cavern fell away until they were invisible on either side. At the same instant a great gust of wind came tearing past and extinguished the torch.

"Hold it!" Hatfield called to Uncle Mike, and fumbled for a match.

He crept forward cautiously a few feet and abruptly glanced upward. Far, far above was light. A narrow, ragged strip of blue sky seemed to press directly down upon the broken crests of two awful cliffs that soared upward for at least twice a thousand feet.

Feebly, reluctantly, the light filtered down into the vast gulf, but only the faint shadow-dregs, murky, uncertain. It changed the all-pervading gloom to a misty gray that was ghostly and ominous.

Hatfield saw now that they stood on the brink of a frightful chasm. Its lip was jagged and torn, as if in some far distant age the mountain had been rent and driven by some appalling convulsion of Nature.

Its depth he could not guess, for only a few feet below the lip the gloom was intense. Nor could he see the far wall, which likewise was shrouded in darkness.

Cautiously he kicked a loose stone over the edge. It fell silently, and vanished. He listened, straining his ears, but no sound drifted up from the dark depths. They were so tremendous that the sound of the heavy rock striking bottom did not carry back, if it ever did strike bottom!

Jim Hatfield had a feeling that this mighty wound in her breast, this terrific slash of an avenging angel's sword, sank to earth's very heart. He shook to the blasts of wind that tore down the gulf. His ears rang with its hum and roar.

"GOOD gosh, this is awful!" bawled Uncle Mike, wiping sweat from his face with a trembling hand.

Hatfield, his eyes becoming accus-

tomed to the dim light, peered forward. He could dimly make out a ledge of rock, only a few feet in width, that soared upward from the lip of the gulf in a steep curve.

Right out over the yawning blackness stretched the narrow curved ribbon, its upper surface slightly rounded. Under the blows of the rushing wind it hummed like a giant tuning fork of stone.

"It's a bridge!" Hatfield shouted to Shaw. "A natural bridge that reaches to the other side of this hole! Reckon we'll have to cross it."

"Cross on *that?*" wailed Uncle Mike. "It might fall down, and even if it don't we'll shore be blowed off!"

"Guess we'll have to risk it," Hatfield shouted back "I figger it won't fall, and I reckon we won't get blowed off if we are careful. We'll have to creep along in the dark. I've tried to light the torch, but there ain't a chance in this wind."

Uncle Mike squawked a despairing curse, but edged along behind Hatfield as the Ranger set his foot cautiously upon the sloping surface of the bridge.

Foot by foot they crept along, leaning against the gusts of wind that tore down the gulf, cautiously testing each step as they advanced. The gloom was intense, deepening as the sun sank lower and less light seeped into the chasm. The bridge hummed and vibrated, seeming to jerk and sway as the blast beat upon it.

They ceased to climb and reached a level space. They were upon the very apex of the bridge, the frightful depths below them, the walls of rock towering above their heads. They paused for breath.

Without warning a strange and wonderful thing happened. A great sword of reddish flame pierced the gloom, falling full upon the bridge, staining the whirling mist-wreaths in the gulf with bloody light. It was a beam from the setting sun, falling through some rift or crevice in the rock wall far above.

Instantly what had been deepest shadow pulsed with intense light. Hatfield could see that the soaring arch upon which they stood was comparatively slight. The thickness of the stone at the apex could not be more than a yard, perhaps less.

The rock thickened at each end, however, as it approached the cliffs, until it was a mighty buttress welded to the solid mass of the wall. At the far end of the bridge, twice a score of yards distant, he could see the dark opening which was a continuation of the cave.

"Quick!" he exclaimed to Uncle Mike. "Quick, while the light lasts. It'll be gone in a minute!"

They shuffled down the far slope of the bridge, stepped thankfully onto firm ground once more and turned to look back at the awesome scene.

For several minutes the great ray of light flamed and pulsed through the shadows, then as abruptly as it had come it snapped off. Darkness, intense, impenetrable, closed down.

HATFIELD stepped into the cave mouth. Sheltered from the blast of the wind, he relighted the torch and they continued their progress.

"Well," grunted Uncle Mike, "I always figgered I'd end up in perdition, but I never expected to get a glim at the front door 'fore my time."

"Looked sorta like that, didn't it," chuckled Hatfield. "But it wasn't so bad as it looked. That bridge was firm enough."

"Couple good licks with a sledge hammer would knock it down in the middle," grunted Shaw. "Weren't more'n a couple feet thick all the twenty feet of that level stretch and for another ten foot down the far slope. Looked almighty flimsy to me when I was standin' on it, lookin' down in that red light."

Hatfield nodded but directed his attention ahead.

"Look!" he suddenly exclaimed. "We shore ain't the first jiggers to travel this road."

Cut deeply in the rock wall was a singular device. Old Mike stared at it, swore under his breath.

"What the blue bloomin' blazes is it?" he demanded.

Hatfield examined the engraving

carefully with glowing eyes.

"It's a heraldic device," he explained. "And I'm thinkin' it's the lions and towers of Castile, from which developed the Spanish coat of arms. Leon was joined with Castile centuries ago, before the joinin' of Aragon and Castile produced modern Spain, and Leon adopted the arms of Castile."

"And that means?" hesitated Uncle Mike, understanding little of what the Ranger said.

"Can't say for shore," Hatfield replied, "but this cuttin' is mighty old and I'd say was done by that old *Don* Enrique de Leon, who was murdered by de Castro for the treasure they both knew about. Or done by the old don's orders."

Old Mike wet his suddenly dry lips with the tip of his tongue.

"Then—then," he mumbled, "mebbe there *is* a treasure!"

"Mebbe," Hatfield agreed tersely. "Let's go and see."

They continued down the passage, which was much more difficult to travel than that which led to the chasm and the bridge, due to the multitude of boulders and shattered rocks, between which were deep crevices in which it would be easy to break a leg. The air was close and heavy and they sweated profusely and suffered much from thirst.

"If there *is* anythin', we shore are earnin' it," croaked Uncle Mike. "Look! Ain't that 'nother of them markin's?"

It was. Again cut deeply into the rock wall was the shape of a shield adorned with lions and towers. And cut beneath it was a cross.

"I've a notion we're getting hot!" exclaimed Uncle Mike.

Another score of paces and the tunnel suddenly opened into a chamber of some extent. Hatfield lighted a fresh torch and held it high.

"Good gosh!" gasped Uncle Mike.

His face stern, Hatfield walked across the room and bent a somber gaze upon the pitiful remains crouched against the rock, the shrunken ankle of each still fettered by a heavy chain.

"Injuns!" muttered Uncle Mike. "In this dry air they turned into mummies. Just some dried skin stretched over bone. Yaquis, from the looks of 'em."

"Yes," Hatfield said softly, "some of 'those dark ones who died toiling in the black dark!' " Grimly he quoted the words written in blood by long dead Fernando de Castro. "And over there," he added, his voice cold, depressed, "is why they died."

Uncle Mike Shaw followed his gesture and stared pop-eyed at the rows of stacked metal bars. In the light of the torch they gave off a dull, smoldering glow. The old man shuffled over to them, lifted one from its place with evident effort.

"Gold!" he muttered. "Gold ingots! The produce of the mine when the gravel was a sight richer than what we turn up today. They hid it here until they could take it safe to Mexico and mebbe to Spain."

"Uh-huh," Hatfield agreed. "They used the Indians to carry it here, then chained 'em to the wall and left 'em to die in the dark, so's they could never tell anybody where the gold was hid. Salty gents in those days, old-timer! But the secret came down through the years by means of old de Castro's message, and mebbe other ways, too. Old Ramon Penelosa knew something 'bout it, and figgered out how to get it, too, mebbe."

"But he never got it!" exulted Mike Shaw. "We've got it! Hatfield, we're rich!"

The Lone Wolf gazed at him, and in the flickering light of the torch his eyes were kind, and a trifle amused.

"You're rich," he corrected. "The gold is on yore claim, and it belongs to you—and Joe Hayes. It ain't as valuable as old de Castro figgered it was in his day, but there's plenty to have yuh both sittin' pretty, no matter how *Escondida* pans out."

He stemmed old Mike's torrent of protest with a raised hand. There was a finality in his voice that forbade further argument.

"I've got my job," he stated. "One that'll keep me busy for so long as I last, and I haven't got time to be bur-

dened with a lot of *dinero*. Come on, now, let's get back. We can't carry the gold out by ourselves. Mighty few torches left and we don't want to get caught in the dark."

Old Mike stared into the Lone Wolf's lean, stern face, bewilderment struggling with admiration in his eyes. But without protest he turned and followed him up the passage. Weary, thirsty, depressed by the remembrance of the agonized lines in the mummified faces of the Indians who had died of hunger and thirst in the black dark, they struggled toward the outer air.

They were not far from the cave mouth, and the bridge, clattering noisily over the boulders, their torch flaring and winking in the dark, when the air trembled to a sullen boom followed by a rending, crashing sound.

"Good gosh!" exclaimed Uncle Mike. "What was that?"

Hatfield halted in his tracks, hesitated a moment, then raced forward, his face grimly set, instinctively extinguishing the torch as he reached the cave mouth.

A PALE shimmer, evidently of moonlight, seeped down from the vast heights. Through it the wind howled. The bridge hummed as before, but it seemed to Hatfield that the note had changed, was shrill, discordant, like to the dissonance of a broken harp string.

Cautiously he stepped upon the sloping surface, glided up it a few paces, and halted. Where the curve had formerly joined the level crest was a ragged edge of shattered stone. Before him stretched a gap, the width of which he could not guess, but so great that what lay beyond was shrouded in impenetrable gloom!

And as Hatfield stared in unbelieving bewilderment, from the black dark screeched maniacal laughter, then a jeering, exultant voice.

"Trapped!" yelled the voice above the roar of the wind. "Trapped! Stay there, you accursed meddler. Stay there until your bones are white! You came in search of gold? And found it? Fine! Eat it! Drink it! Soon you'd barter it all for a mouthful of water. Stay there with the gold you found! I am in no hurry. I will wait, and step over your bones when I come to get the gold!"

A last wild screech of laughter, Hatfield thought he heard the sound of retreating footsteps as the wind lulled for a moment. Then silence descended, silence as lonely and impenetrable as the black dark.

CHAPTER XIX

A Darkened Tomb

CAUTIOUSLY Uncle Mike Shaw crept up the curving stone to join Hatfield.

"Good gosh!" he quavered. "Who was that?"

"That isn't important now, not to us," Hatfield told him grimly, "and it may never be, from the looks of things."

"But what's it all about? What happened?"

"I was right back there in the treasure chamber, when I said the secret of this place mighta come down through the years by other ways as well as old de Castro's letter," said Hatfield. "It did come down, and somebody figgered it out. I'd oughta thought of that, took it in account when the real meanin' of that reflected ray of light come to me."

He spoke with bitter self accusation.

"That feller yuh just heard had the key, and was waitin' for the right time of the year to use it. He come lookin' like we did, saw us workin' down the slope and bided his time. Chances are he knew about what he would find once he got in the cave. Slipped along after us, shoved a stick of dynamite into a crevice after we had passed over and blew down that thin section of the bridge." Hatfield groaned. "I'd shore oughta figgered on somebody mebbe havin' an eye on us."

"You ain't the A'mighty, son," declared Uncle Mike bravely. "You can't be expected to think of every-

thing. Wonder why he didn't just wait over there and shoot us as we crossed over? That'd been easy."

"That wouldn't suit his kind of blood," the Ranger said soberly. "He'll get a lot more pleasure out of thinkin' of us over here in the dark, starvin' and dyin' of thirst. That's what he meant when he told us to eat and drink gold.

"And he had to hang around and wait until he had a chance to taunt us 'fore he left. He could see our torch comin' down the passage a long time 'fore we got here, and he cut his fuse accordin'. Yeah, he had to stay and laugh. But I didn't hear no drums this time."

AT THAT last cryptic remark Uncle Mike stared at him. But he was too overwhelmed by their awful predicament to ask questions.

"I'm so thirsty right now I could chew leather," he muttered.

Hatfield stared into the dark.

"We gotta figger us a way outa this mess," he declared, and added with grim certainty: "If we don't there'll be another corpse lyin' somewhere in the hills within the next forty-eight hours—with the tongue cut out!"

Vainly he tried to pierce the gloom beyond the broken edge. He quickly decided that the distance was too great to jump, even if we could see anything to land on.

"We've gotta know how far it is to the other broken end," he told Uncle Mike. "Take off yore coat and make a little tent with it. Then mebbe we can get one of these stalks burning good and toss it over when the wind lulls. Get a glimpse of what's over there, mebbe, 'fore it goes out."

They got the torch going after considerable difficulty. Taking advantage of a moment of comparative calm, Hatfield hurled the flaming stalk across the gulf.

By the brief illumination before gusts extinguished the flame, he located the shattered end of the span on the far side of the gap. It was fully forty feet distant, and half of that lower down than the broken lip upon which they stood.

Old Mike's voice sounded hollowly through the dark.

"Son, it looks like we're done. Yuh never could jump that."

Hatfield did not reply. He fingered the thin, strong lariat looped over his shoulder.

"If there was just something over there to drop a loop over, it would be easy," he ruminated. "The twine's plenty strong to hold me, to hold both of us, for that matter, and we could make a bridge of it and go across hand over hand. But there's not a knob or projection over there, nor even anything to tie to on this side."

For a long time he stood staring into the dark, visioning the shattered fragment still projecting from the parent rock.

"It's a lot lower down than where we are, and that would help in a jump," he told Shaw.

"Son," protested the oldster, "yuh can't jump no forty feet through the dark, and yuh ain't goin' to try it so long as I can hold onto yuh."

"No," Hatfield admitted, "I can't jump it, but I might swing across on the end of the rope."

"What in all creation yuh goin' to tie to on this side?" demanded old Shaw. "There ain't nothin' above us but about a million miles of air, and down below—"

Hatfield's exultant exclamation interrupted him.

"You hit it, Uncle Mike," he shouted against the roar of the wind. "That's it—down below! Look, we can whip both ends of the rope over this busted section here, tie fast and make a swing of the loop that'll hang down below the under surface of the bridge.

"Then I can shin down the rope, stand in the loop and pump till I get her swingin' way out toward the other broken end of the bridge. When I swing out as far as possible, I'll let go and the momentum will shoot me through the air and I'll land on the bridge over there. It's a cinch."

"Yuh're loco!" howled Uncle Mike. Yuh'll go into the gulf as shore as shootin'! If yuh don't, yuh'll break yore neck when yuh come down on the rock!"

"No, I won't," Hatfield reassured him. "This broken end of the bridge is right in line with the one over there, and the rope will swing in a straight line. The rope's sixty feet long, and when I let go, I'll not be far above the surface of the bridge over there, which ain't more'n twenty feet lower than this end."

"But yuh can't do it in the dark!" protested Uncle Mike. "If the rope should twist just a mite while yuh're swingin', yuh wouldn't know it and then yuh'd miss that narrer strip of rock over there."

Hatfield nodded. "Yuh're right," he agreed thoughtfully. "I'll have to have light, and we can't keep a torch goin' in this wind."

For a moment there was blank silence, then Hatfield again exclaimed exultantly:

"The ray of light! The ray that stabs through the dark at sunset! It lights the whole place up like day. That's it! But we'll have to wait until sunset."

UNCLE MIKE glanced upward toward the far-off strip of sky.

"Can't see no stars any more, and the sky's gettin' light," he announced. "Must be mighty nigh to mornin'. We'll have all day to wait. Can tell when it's just about sunset by the looks of the sky. It'll be a long wait."

"Let's get the rope tied good and proper," Hatfield said cheerfully. "We want everything to be ready when it's time for the big show to come off."

Securing the rope to the narrow, thin jut of rock was not particularly difficult, and when the double strand dangled in the darkness, Hatfield was satisfied that it was long enough and would perform satisfactorily. After that there was nothing to do but retire to the cave mouth and wait for sunset. . . .

The day seemed endless, tortured as they were by hunger and thirst, but finally its weary length drew to a close. The strip of sky grew darkling, tiny flecks of rose-colored cloud told that sunset was near at hand.

Hatfield flexed his long arms, limbered his legs and stepped to the very lip of the broken bridge. As he did so a gnarled old hand reached through the gloom.

"Good luck, son," Uncle Mike Shaw said, a trifle unsteadily. "If yuh make it, I'll loosen one end of the rope and toss it over to yuh and yuh can hold it while I slide across. If yuh don't—well, wait for me on the 'other side' I won't be far behind yuh!"

Hatfield returned the strong grip, and slid down the rope. He fixed his feet firmly in the loop and began gently to pump back and forth as he had done in a swing in boyhood days.

His body began to sway backward and forward. The rope creaked under his weight, the knots slipped and tightened. All about him was Stygian gloom, through which the gusts of wind shrieked and howled, plucking at his clothes, buffeting him, seeking to hurl him into the bottomless depths.

It was a weird, awful position. He lost his sense of direction and could not tell for sure if he were swinging back and forth in a straight course beneath the arch of the bridge, or veering sideward and out of line with the shattered tip far across the black gulf. Above him, Uncle Mike shouted hoarse encouragement.

Without the slightest warning came the ray, cleaving through the dark like a fiery sword. Instantly the whole scene was illumined.

Hatfield saw the ragged lip of the further fragment of the span. He was swinging to the full length of the twin ropes, but it seemed far, far away, and far below him.

He set his jaw grimly, tried not to look into the horrible depths. Freeing his feet from the loop, he hung by his hands as the rope swung back.

Back, back he swung, until his rigid body almost touched the under surface of the span. Then he rushed forward at frightful speed. At the climax of the swing, with his body standing straight out from the loop, he let go.

The wind howled in his ears, the mists swirled about him like a bloody shroud. And, even as his body hurtled

toward the narrow rounded surface of the broken bridge, the light ray snapped off as if sliced by a giant screen.

IT SEEMED to Hatfield that he rushed through the awful dark for untold ages, the wind screeching past. For a terrible, paralyzing instant of time he *knew* he had veered sideward and missed the narrow rib of stone. Then, with a crash that set every joint to creaking, he struck the rounded surface.

Red lights stormed before his eyes. He skittered, rolled, clutching with despairing fingers at the uneven surface. On the very lip of the stone he halted, and lay gasping.

Old Mike was howling anguished questions through the dark. Hatfield raised his head and roared back assurance. Shaw yelled like a Comanche at a scalping, his voice cracking on a joyous note.

Hatfield got painfully to his feet, decided that all joints were in working order and no bones broken. He shouted to Shaw to untie one end of the rope and throw it across. A moment later he heard it smack sharply against the stone nearby. He groped to where the end lay, seized it and drew the rope taut.

He took a couple of turns about his waist, seated himself with his heels braced against a ridge of stone and shouted okay to Shaw. He felt the rope sag as old Mike Shaw put his weight upon it, but the oldster was a small man and much worn by the years. Hatfield had little difficulty in holding the rope fairly taut.

Shaw came sliding down through the darkness, hand over hand. In a moment he was safe beside the Ranger. Without wasting time in mutual congratulation at their almost miraculous escape from dreadful death, they hurried to the outer air.

They found the horses where they had left them, saddled up, and rode swiftly down the dark trail to town. They reached the *Escondida* Building unobserved, and old Mike dispatched a trusted swamper to round up Ted Harper.

Soon the foreman came hurrying in, his eyes wide with astonishment.

"Good gosh!" he sputtered. "Where did you come from, Boss?" We thought—there's been talk—"

"No time for talk now," Hatfield rapped at him. "Get twenty of yore best fightin' men together—with guns and hosses! They'll be sworn in as a sheriff's posse. Send Casey to find Neale King and bring him here. Deputy Neale King, mind you, *not* Sheriff Wagner. Don't tell anybody yuh've seen us, and tell Casey to keep *his* mouth shut. And send that swamper out for all the coffee and chuck he can carry!"

It was not more than half an hour after that when, in Ruby's saloon. Henry Lyons, Sheriff Walt Wagner, and scar-faced Frank Durade were grouped around a table, conversing earnestly.

At the far end of the bar, young Joe Hayes talked with equal earnestness to Ruby, who kept shaking her golden head.

"You can't make me believe Hatfield has run off with anybody's money, or did anything underhanded," Ruby declared stubbornly.

YOUNG Joe threw out his hands in expostulation. His face was worried, uncertain.

"*I* ain't tellin' yuh anythin', Ruby," he declared. "I'm just passin' on what's bein' talked all over town. Hatfield and Uncle Mike was seen, just about daybreak yesterday, ridin' fast up the Chisos Trail, like they was headed for Welch. They never got to Welch.

"Cyamon Johnson left Welch early yesterday headed for Coma. He didn't pass 'em on the way here, and there ain't no other way to get to Welch. They turned off somewheres, and about the only place yuh can turn off to from the Chisos is Mexico. Nobody knows what shape the *Escondida* affairs are in, but I'm scared they're mighty bad."

"Something terrible has happened to Hatfield and Uncle Mike," Ruby insisted. "They wouldn't . . . Good Heavens!"

The swinging doors had suddenly been flung open. Through them strode two tall figures. One was Deputy-sheriff Neale King, who sauntered toward the bar. The other, taller, broader, with eyes that were like pools of fire under ice, strode straight to the tables at which were seated Lyons, Wagner and Durade.

Their faces blanched. They sat there staring as if at a ghost risen from the dead. On the broad breast of the tall man gleamed a silver star set on a silver circle. It caught the light as he halted before the table and blazed as with leaping flame.

"Good gosh!" Walt Wagner squealed. "That feller's a Ranger."

"Yeah, yuh sidewinders!" boomed Neale King. "A Ranger! And—the *Lone Wolf!*"

CHAPTER XX

From North and South

EVERY man in that crowded room had heard that name. They stared in awed wonder at the almost legendary figure who was discussed, admired and yarned about from end to end of Texas—and beyond—wherever fighting men got together.

Jim Hatfield's voice rang out, edged with steel, vibrating power and authority.

"In the name of the State of Texas, I arrest for robbery and murder, Walter Wagner, Frank Durade, and Enrique de Leon de Penelosa!"

Walt Wagner uttered a thin wail of terror. Durade shrank back, stiffened with set purpose. But at the utterance of the final name, Henry Lyons' somber face shone as dark as death. His lips writhed back from his gleaming teeth, his eyes spat black flame.

With a move too fast for the eye to follow, he hurled the heavy table over and crouched behind it. His heavy six leaped to his right hand, and a stubby derringer slapped against his left palm.

Durade was on his feet, shooting with both hands. He died with his fingers stiff on the triggers of his guns, and with Hatfield's bullets laced through his heart. Walt Wagner dived for the door, but Neale King clubbed him to the floor with a slashing blow of his gun barrel.

From behind the table, Henry Lyons shot it out with the Ranger. A red streak leaped across Hatfield's bronzed cheek, one sleeve was slashed to ribbons by whining slugs, blood dripped from where one grazed his arm.

He glanced at the panic-stricken people in the saloon, slowly holstered his smoking guns and walked to the splintered table top. Behind it lay Henry Lyons, who had been *Don* Enrique de Leon de Penelosa, in whose veins ran the blood of that stern old soldier and friend of the Spanish King whose name he bore.

Escolita, the little dancer, was sobbing in Ruby's arms, Joe Hayes hovering miserably nearby. Hatfield walked over to Escolita.

"What was he to you?" he asked gently, motioning toward the dead Lyons.

"He was my stepfather," she replied. "The grandson of Ramon Penelosa. He married my mother who was his cousin and, like him, of the blood of de Leon and de Penelosa. She died because of his cruelty and neglect. He came here nearly a year ago and,"—she added this quite simply—"I followed him to avenge my mother."

"Yuh knew the story of the hidden gold of de Leon?" Hatfield asked.

The girl nodded. "The story has always been known in my family. There was an old paper that nobody could understand."

"Enrique—er—Lyons figgered it out," Hatfield said grimly. "That's why he came here. For that, and to be revenged on the descendants of the man who murdered his grandfather. He did for Bruce Ralston, and others. You were the next one on the list, Hayes."

"No—no!" gasped Escolita.

Hatfield smiled a little, his eyes suddenly sunny. They hardened immediately however as they lighted on

Walt Wagner sitting up and looking sick.

"Bring him over here, Neale," he called.

When Wagner stood before him, downcast and trembling, Hatfield spoke to the point.

"Better talk, Wagner," he advised. "Yore two pards are done in, and Ted Harper and a special sheriff's posse are ridin' down the valley to drop a loop on the 'Injuns'."

"The Indians?" gasped Ruby.

"Uh-huh," Hatfield told her. "Lyons' outfit he brought with him from Mexico. They are all asleep in Lyon's bunkhouse, with the dye washed off their faces and some of them with their black hair parted and combed as it should be. And those who haven't got black hair are not wearin' their wigs. There won't be no more drums beatin' in the hills."

He went on to explain as he saw the inquiry in his listeners' eyes.

"It was the hair that gave me my first notion of what was goin' on. That jigger I shot over in Talkin' Water Canyon, the one who started the avalanche, had his hair combed down over his forehead, Yaqui style, but I figgered it sorta funny that there'd be the mark of a side part showing plain when his hair fell back.

"I looked close, then, and saw his face had been stained brown with vegetable dye any old-timer of the hills knows how to make—I've used it myself. The feller who died from the dynamite explosion that night on the old gold road was fixed up similar, and the other jigger that died was a red-headed white man. Sorta funny company for a band of raidin' Yaquis."

"But what about the Injun drums?" demanded Uncle Mike Shaw, who had joined the group at the end of the bar.

"You'd oughta know better, old-timer," Hatfield chided. "I've had considerable experience with Injuns, and I never knew 'em to go around beatin' drums promiscuous-like when anything happened. Drums are serious business with Injuns, and are beat only on important and extra special occasions. The drums were to make folks *think* Injun, and blame Injuns for what was happenin'. Worked pretty well.

"And that night when the dynamite exploded on the gold road, I got a good look at Durade's face. He was stained dark like the rest, but the scar showed plain. I learned that Durade had once worked for Lyons. Lyons pretended to have a row with him and fired him, and sent him to get in with Joe Hayes and egg him on to doin' things which would sooner or later cast suspicion on Joe. I was sorta uncertain about Joe at first, myself. He was always around when things happened. But then so was Lyons."

He turned suddenly to Wagner.

"Lyons killed the sheriff, didn't he?"

"Yes," Wagner admitted sullenly. "He stood outside the window and heard yuh talkin' to Dobson and saw yuh give him that thirty-two-twenty gun. Bruce Ralston grabbed that gun off Lyons the night Lyons and the outfit was torturin' him back in Yaller Hoss Canyon. Killed a man who was holdin' him and bruk away, but Lyons drilled him as he rode off.

"Lyons had to get that gun back and do for Dobson. There's folks in the valley knowed he carried it. If he'd had any notion you was a Ranger instead of just a jigger hornin' into the game, he'd tried harder to do yuh in. You fooled everybody, Hatfield."

OLD Mike spoke again.

"How'd yuh come to catch onto Lyons in the first place?"

"His name," the Lone Wolf replied. "Henry Lyons is a free translation of the Spanish Enrique de Leon. Seems owlhoots have a habit of taking aliases that are similar in some way or other to their real names. I got to thinkin' serious on the revenge angle when yuh told me that yarn 'bout the Howard-Penelosa feud.

"Bruce Ralston had his tongue cut out, and so did that XT cowboy who was a cousin to him. And I found out that feller Warner who was hung on a Chola cactus was related to old John Howard, and *his* tongue was cut out, yuh'll recollect. But that didn't happen to the other XT puncher, who

wasn't of the Howard clan. He just had the bad luck to be with the other one Lyons was after when the gang caught him.

"Accordin' to the story, *Don* Ramon Penelosa's tongue was cut in two by John Howard's bullet and he couldn't give his son the last message he was trying to. They remember things like that down in *manana* land. *Don* Ramon Penelosa's son never made it back into Texas to avenge the killin' of his father, but he told *his* son, Enrique de Leon de Penelosa, and swore him to carry on the feud.

"Sounds funny, hate carrying down that way through the years but . . . Well, my own family fought for fifty years with another family back in Kentucky and Virginia—a fight that started over the killing of a pig!

"Then Lyons come into the bar here the first night I saw Escolita, and I saw she was scared stiff of him. That was funny, seein' as she just recent come from down Mexico way and Lyons had been here nearly a year. He tried to kidnap her that night. And I also learned that Lyons was in town the night the girl Flame was knifed in the hallway outside of Escolita's room. Lyons had figgered what Escolita was up to, and he set out to cash her in."

Escolita shuddered and nodded her black head vigorously. Hatfield paused to roll a cigarette.

"But where Lyons slipped bad," he went on then, "was with the cartridge loops on his gun-belt. Those loops were built to hold thirty-two-twenty cartridges. When he got rid of that odd-calibered gun, instead of getting a new belt, he just opened out the loops a mite to accommodate forty-five caliber shells. Mighty careless, for the marks of the original stitching showed if yuh looked close. The rest was easy."

"Uh-huh," grunted Uncle Mike Shaw. "Easy as catchin' rattlesnakes with yore bare hands! But why did Lyons start makin' trouble for me and the mine?"

"He was scared yuh might uncover the hidin' place of the de Leon gold when yuh started tearin' down the gravel bank with water," Hatfield explained. "He knew it was up there somewheres on the slope, but couldn't tell for shore just where until the ray of light revealed it."

Suddenly he turned to Escolita, smiled down at her.

"Well, senorita," he said, "ain't it about time you and Joe stopped fightin' and got together?"

Hayes looked perfectly willing, but the girl resolutely shook her head.

"No—no!" she exclaimed. "He is one of the family my family hates!"

HATFIELD reached out, cupped her white little chin in his bronzed hand. She stared up at him with wide eyes. Slowly, distinctly, he quoted the words cut in the granite face of the Devil's Finger.

"Heard that before, haven't yuh?" he asked softly.

"Si, si!" she replied in surprise. "It is cut in the stone of a great cliff that stands between two streams near my home in *Mejico*. How know you the words?"

"Lyons cut 'em in that big spire up there," he replied gesturing toward the Finger.

He reached out and grasped Joe Hayes' hand. Slowly he drew the hands of the girl and the young rancher together.

" 'The stream of the North and the stream of the South'," he quoted softly. " 'Let them join, and blood will cease to cry out for blood.' That's the way to end feuds. A feller can't very well fight with his wife's relations!"

"Well, they're shore joined close enough now," remarked Uncle Mike as Joe Hayes clasped Escolita in his strong arms, and she offered no objection.

Hatfield smiled down at them, turned to Ruby, who was gazing at him with eyes that seemed to look out of a past that was dead. He took her hand and bowed over it courteously.

"Reckon I'll be ridin' now," he said. "Captain McDowell has another little chore for me over east. Good-by, ma'am. Reckon the next time I happen this way, yuh'll sorta be a grandmother by adoption!"

Through the pale radiance of the dying moon the Lone Wolf rode the Chisos Trail, lounging in his saddle with careless grace, toward where new and stirring adventure waited, pleasant anticipation in his green eyes. No drums beat in the shadow of the hills, no flying hoofs of terror pounded the dusty trail.

But far up in the lonely fastness of the Phantoms sounded the beautiful wild mourn of a hunting wolf.

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Ed Shelley stood there with a gun in his hand

JAILBIRD

By DEAN OWEN

Author of "Spurs for a Lawman," etc.

Tom Chance Faces a Killer Set-Up and Proves a Fast-Draw Artist Is Not Always Quick on the Trigger!

TOM CHANCE took the bad news standing behind the desk of his hotel, there in Wildhorse. With the stiff fingers of his right hand, he snapped the sleeve band on his shirt.

It was after the supper hour and Linda was in the hotel kitchen giving the cook instructions for the next day. A bracket lamp burned on the wall beside Tom, its yellow rays washing over the florid face of Bat Harbin, who stood with big thumbs hooked in a sagging vest. His lips were pulled in a sneer. Tom had to fight to keep his voice level.

"So Ed Shelley sawed outa prison. Ed was never one to stay behind bars." He tried to smile, but the smile lacked humor.

Bat Harbin slanted his big hat over his greenish eyes.

"Thought yuh'd be glad to know about Shelley," he said.

Harbin rubbed his hand over the marshal's star on his vest. He turned

to leave the hotel, then paused.

"Most likely Shelley will try to see Linda. Hope that don't interfere with yore wedding plans any."

"I never liked yuh, Harbin." Tom Chance's voice was flat and cold.

He clenched and unclenched the fingers of his stiff right hand, wishing for the gun speed which had been taken from him by a bullet from an outlaw's gun. "Linda and I are goin' to be married," he went on slowly. "Not even Ed Shelley can change that."

"Mebby Ed might let you have Linda when he's tired of her—"

TOM CHANCE swung swiftly around the end of the hotel desk, his blue eyes cold as a chunk of winter sky. With his left hand he grabbed Bat Harbin by the shirt front and slammed him against the wall, so hard that his hat rolled to the floor.

"That's a dirty lie and yuh know it." Chance spoke harshly, his white teeth clenched, muscles ribbing out on either side of his heavy jaw. "You'll speak carefully of that girl, Harbin, or yuh won't be around to welcome Ed Shelley or anybody else."

A moment of stark fear showed in Bat Harbin's greenish eyes as he glared at Chance. Then his hand dropped to his low-riding gun, as he jerked away from the other man's grasp.

"For a minute I thought it was the old Tom Chance talkin'. The feller that was hell on wheels with a gun." There was a mocking note in Harbin's voice. "I forgot. You're just like an old man, your right hand is stiff an' you can't pull a gun. That is, not very fast."

"No?" said Chance coldly. "No!" Harbin's face was red beneath the stubble of black beard on his cheeks. "You talk to me like that again, Chance, and yuh'll live to regret it."

He turned on his heel and stamped out of the lobby, his heavy tread shaking the chimney on the bracket lamp.

For long seconds Tom Chance stood there, his long legs planted firmly on the pine floor. He cursed his own weakness—that stiff right hand. There was a time when Tom Chance had been marshal of Wildhorse, but that was five years ago.

He and Ed Shelley had practically been raised together on old Mack Paine's Rolling M ranch. Old Mack Paine had been Linda's father and he had died the same year Tom's own dad had cashed in his chips. Linda and Ed Shelley had gone to all the dances in Wildhorse together. Tom could remember what some of the townspeople had said about it at the time.

"They sure make a good lookin' couple. Hope if Linda marries Ed she'll tame him down."

But Ed Shelley hadn't tamed down, neither had he married Linda Paine. For Ed Shelley had killed a man and being marshal, Tom Chance had to bring him in or turn in his badge. He had chosen the latter course.

He couldn't stand to see Linda hurt. He remembered the way tears had come to her eyes when he saddled up and rode out of Wildhorse. Six months ago a letter had caught up with him in Montana. His father was dead and the Wildhorse Hotel was his only inheritance.

He was broke, disgusted. Disgusted and disillusioned because the people who had hailed him as a hero now laughed behind his back. He recalled the words of the little bald headed doctor, who had treated his bullet-shattered wrist in that little Montana cowtown.

"Son, your right hand is no good. Sure you can use it for ordinary things, but your gun speed will never be the same. You've been a good marshal in this town, son. But it's a tough town and if some of the boys knew you couldn't beat them at the draw, they'd gun you down on sight. Take my advice. Go home."

Tom Chance, for the second time in his life, had turned in a marshal's badge. He hadn't figured on returning to Wildhorse and claiming his legacy. But he had thought bitterly, running a hotel was all he was good for now.

He had returned to Wildhorse to find that Linda Paine was running the hotel dining room. When her father had died he had left so many debts, the Rolling M had been sold to satisfy creditors. When he had come into the hotel, she had been there.

"I knew you'd come, Tom," Linda had said with a smile. "I've waited for you."

Life had begun all over again for Tom Chance. Now it was about to crash down around his ears. Ed Shelley had been sentenced to twenty years in the Territorial Prison. But Shelley had escaped, and Tom knew, as well as he knew the sun would rise in the morning, that Ed Shelley would come to Wildhorse and Linda.

High heels clicking on the pine floor jerked him back from his reverie. Linda Paine came into the lobby and stopped.

Her pretty, oval face was drained of its color. Her eyes were red. She had been crying.

"Tom—I'm going to my room. I—don't feel well."

Tom took her in his arms, the faint perfume from her hair intoxicating him with its fragrance. Even as he held her close, he felt her body stiffen and a puzzled frown ridged between his blue eyes.

His voice was soft. "You know about Ed." It was a statement rather than a question.

"Yes—I know about Ed. I heard you talking to Bat Harbin."

A sob escaped from her lips and she whirled out of his arms and ran up the stairs.

"She is still in love with him," Chance said aloud.

IT was an hour later that Bat Harbin and Will Matlock, railroad detective, for the D. G. & G., came into the lobby of the Wildhorse Hotel. Matlock was thin—thin as a pipe stem. A heavy, black cigar jutted from an angle out of his mouth. In the days when Tom Chance had been marshal of Wildhorse, he had had dealings with Matlock a couple of times.

"Howdy," Matlock's voice was a strange contrast to his size. It rambled and rasped. "I'll come right to the point. You and Shelley used to be friends. He and some of his new gang held up one of our trains last night. We think he's wounded. It was carrying eighteen thousand dollars. The Gypsy Gal Mine payroll. You and Shelley had a fallin' out. Somethin' about a girl, wasn't it?"

Bat Harbin leaned fat elbows on top of the hotel desk. His greenish eyes speculative.

"Linda Paine was always stuck on Ed Shelley," he said. "There's us in town bettin' if Shelley came back, she'd throw Tom here overboard."

Tom Chance studied the two men, his thoughts spinning. But no hint of the emotion which was churning around inside of him showed on his face. Tom Chance knew how to play his cards without letting the other fellow know what he held.

Will Matlock had said that Ed Shelley was wounded. Chance suddenly remembered the blood he had found on the back step of the hotel just about sunup. There had been a bloodied rag there in the weeds.

This evening he had gone down behind the hotel to where Little Ben River roared along its crooked course through the mountains. He had seen the slit of yellow light which came from a back room on the second floor. Chance had asked Linda about this and he remembered her words and recalled how frightened her eyes had been.

"I was in that room, Tom. There was nobody else there. I—I left something in there and lighted a lamp to go back and find it."

Now since Will Matlock had come in with a statement that Ed Shelley was wounded, a lot of things added up.

When Tom Chance spoke his voice was bitter.

"Ed Shelley don't mean a thing to me," he said.

Will Matlock took the black cigar out of his thin-lipped mouth and blew ash off the end.

"You packin' a Colt since—er—your

gun arm's been stiff?" he asked.

Chance felt the blood in his veins turn hot. He snapped the arm band on his shirt sleeve. He controlled himself with visible effort, jerking his eyes to a sawed-off shotgun which lay on a rack by his elbow.

"This will take care of any trouble I have," Chance said. "And that means Ed Shelley or anybody else."

BAT HARBIN just leaned there against the hotel desk, his greenish eyes narrow, speculating. Will Matlock said.

"There's five thousand on Ed Shelley's head."

A smile touched the lips of Tom Chance and he turned to Bat Harbin.

"It takes money to bring yore kind of lawmen out of his hole, doesn't it, Harbin?" he said.

Harbin didn't answer, but Chance had the feeling that Bat Harbin knew more about Ed Shelley and the D.G.&R. train holdup than he was letting on. Yes, even more than Will Matlock knew.

Will Matlock walked around the lobby surveying every corner, every possible hiding place. He turned and looked up at Tom Chance, cigar smoke screening his features.

"There's too much light in here, if we're goin' to get Shelley, we have to have it darker. Turn out some of the lights, Chance."

Chance untied the rope that held the chandelier and lowered it to the floor. He turned out all the lamps but one. Then he raised the chandelier and fastened the rope to the hook. Chance thought of the times when he had been hot on an outlaw's trail waiting to bring him to justice. It brought a bitter smile to his lips.

Matlock was all business, efficiently preparing to trap a man.

"You, Harbin, get in that room behind the hotel desk. Leave the door open a crack," he ordered. "When Shelley comes in, we'll have him from both sides. He'll surrender or it'll be boothill for Ed Shelley."

Tom Chance watched Bat Harbin take the sawed-off shotgun off the rack.

"You won't be needin' this," Harbin said significantly. "Just in case yuh might get an idea to side with Ed Shelley."

Chance couldn't see where Will Matlock was sitting across the room, but he knew he was there.

"I'm gettin' out of here." Chance started to edge his big body around the desk, but Matlock's voice halted him.

"You're staying right there, Chance. Turn down that light beside you there. When Shelley comes in, talk to him naturally. When I yell to Shelley to put up his hands, duck behind the desk."

"Yuh seem to be sure he is comin'," Chance snapped.

"Ed Shelley heard that you and Linda Paine was gettin' married, that's why he busted out of prison. One of the main reasons anyhow. My guess is, he'll come here and make a try at killin' you."

TOM CHANCE thought about how many times Ed Shelley had crossed his path. He knew now that he never should have turned his marshal's badge in that time to keep from arresting Ed. Ed was no good. And he certainly was no good for Linda.

Then he thought of the blood on the back steps and the way Linda had acted tonight. There could be no doubt about it in his mind. Linda cared for Ed Shelley.

Chance had a high stool behind the hotel desk. He sat down on this waiting for Ed Shelley. The big clock in the corner of the lobby ticked away the minutes. He could hear Bat Harbin moving around in the room behind.

Then he thought he heard a sound like a body sliding over a window sill and he wondered if Bat Harbin had slipped outside—for a drink maybe. He was half full of forty-rod already. Chance grew restless, rolled a cigarette and inhaled the smoke.

Then there was a sound of somebody coming down stairs. Chance looked across to the spot where Will Matlock was sitting, but he couldn't

see anything. There was no sound of Bat Harbin behind him. Then Ed Shelley's voice came from the darkness of the hallway.

"Well if it ain't Tom Chance. What are yuh doin' behind a hotel desk? Thought yuh'd be wearin' a marshal's badge on yore shirt and struttin' up and down the board walk like you used to do. But hell, Tom, here yuh are with a pen in yore hand instead of a gun. If I kill yuh where yuh're standin', I'm goin' to be allmighty ashamed of myself for the rest of my life."

Tom Chance felt the sweat running down over his wide forehead into his eyes. Every nerve, every muscle in his body screamed for action. Ed Shelley was right, here he was with a pen in his hand instead of a gun, for he was writing something in the hotel register and Tom knew he was a fool—a bigger fool than he had been the day he had turned in his badge to keep from arresting Ed Shelley.

Ed Shelley came out of the gloom and faced Tom Chance across the top of the desk. Tom saw that his face was thinner. And his black hair and eyes only accentuated the prison pallor that was stamped on his face.

Shelley's mouth slanted down one corner when he talked and his eyes burned with a familiar light. He had seen many men on the kill and Ed Shelley was one of them. His clothes were muddy and there was a bloody splotch on his shirt.

"Yuh sneaked away from Wildhorse and then came crawlin' back when yuh found they had given me twenty years in the pen. You tried to steal my gal. Yuh thought poor old Ed Shelley is never goin' to get out of jail no more."

He laughed but there was no humor in it. Tom Chance never took his eyes off Ed Shelley's face. He turned the register around and stuck the pen out for Shelley.

"YUH'LL have to sign here if yuh want to room in this hotel."

His stiff right hand had been covering the words he had scribbled on the hotel register. Ed Shelley read them and he looked up at Chance, a sneer on his lips And right then and there Tom Chance knew he had made a mistake.

"I only did it because I didn't want Linda to see you dead here," he said softly.

Then a gun clicked as it came to full cock and Will Matlock's voice boomed out from the darkness.

"Hold it Shelley! You're a target there in the lamp light."

Ed Shelley made no attempt to go for a gun. With a grin on his lips he turned to face the direction from which Matlock's voice had come. There was a confident look on his face that Tom Chance couldn't understand.

Chance waited for Bat Harbin to show himself, but there was no movement in the room behind the desk. Then suddenly twin lances of flame streaked across the room and a roar shook the building. A man screamed horribly as he died. Then before Chance could move, Ed Shelley had his gun out and the barrel drove Chance to his knees, blackness pulling over him and blotting out all light and sound.

Tom Chance struggled back through the darkness that fogged his brain. Somebody pulled him to his feet and Chance saw that it was Bat Harbin. Harbin had a gun in his fist, the muzzle jamming into Chance's stomach. Harbin's voice was mocking.

"We got *you* anyhow."

Tom Chance tried to get his scattered thoughts into a pattern. He saw the lobby of the hotel was jammed with men. His head pained and blood had run down one side of his face, soaking into his shirt.

Harbin was talking again, pointing at the hotel register.

"See, here's what I mean. Shelley and Tom Chance here is working together. Will Matlock knew that Ed Shelley would come here. Tom Chance took that shotgun of his and blew Matlock to pieces and look at this writin'. This is all the proof you need."

Tom Chance saw the words he had written on the hotel register.

"Duck. It's a trap!"

Jeff Kane, who ran the livery, and had known Tom all his life, shook his grey head.

"I wouldn't have believed it," he said. "But there it is in black and white."

Harry McCormick owned the Wildhorse general store. He wore a drooping black mustache and black clothes. Now he turned sombre eyes on Tom Chance. "I guess gettin' that stiff right hand sort of made yuh bitter, eh?" McCormick said. "Ed Shelley wasn't worth it, Tom. Now they'll be hangin' you two side by side."

CHANCE jerked free from Bat Harbin's grasp. He was still dizzy, but when he faced those men in the lobby, his eyes were cold.

"I never killed Will Matlock. You might ask Bat Harbin what he was doin' when the shootin' took place. He had the shotgun himself."

Bat Harbin laughed. "I reckon when you fellers came in yuh saw the scattergun layin' beside Tom Chance. I figure Tom cut loose with the shotgun but not before Matlock had sliced his head with a bullet."

It was then that Linda came into the lobby, her eyes wide with fright.

"What happened, Tom?" she asked.

Quickly he told her. But not before Bat Harbin had put in his version.

"I was on the front porch watchin' through the door waitin' to cover Shelley from that way. Tom Chance here cut loose with that scattergun."

"I don't believe it," Linda said, her voice calming.

Jeff Kane took off his hat and ran fingers through his grey hair.

"It looks bad for Tom, Linda," Kane said. "We all know Tom turned in his badge once to keep from havin' to put the cuffs on Ed Shelley. I reckon he wouldn't stop from killin' Matlock."

Then a voice cut through the blackness of the hallway and the men raised their hands. Fear shown on most of their faces because Ed Shelley was a killer and he stood there now with a gun in his hand and two of his men behind him—all wearing yellow slickers. He looked at Tom Chance and his slanting mouth pulled into a tight grin.

"You got rid of Matlock for me, Tom. I'm gettin' yuh out of this tight. Come on—"

The men in the lobby stood with their hands raised, their burning eyes on Tom Chance. Even Linda's face went white. Only Bat Harbin seemed unconcerned.

Tom Chance stepped around in front of the hotel desk.

"Wait a minute, Ed," he said. "I never had no part in Matlock's killin' and yuh know it."

Ed Shelley laughed, his teeth bared white.

"All right, Tom, if it hurts yore conscience," he said. "But, amigo, we got a date to spend eighteen thousand dollars."

Bat Harbin still kept his hands up, but his greenish eyes bored into Tom's face.

"So you were in on that D.G.&R. train holdup with Shelley, eh," he growled. "I might have known it. Tryin' to be respectable, runnin' a hotel and engaged to marry the purtiest girl in town. And you not only turn out to be a bandit, but also a killer."

Tom Chance clenched his fists and his face grew red. He took a step forward, his eyes burning into Ed Shelley's face.

"Damn you, Ed, I'll—"

THEN Ed Shelley's face grew hard and ruthless.

"You're comin' with me now," he snapped. "I ain't leavin' you behind to tell all you know. Get a move on. Somebody is liable to get hurt here."

Harry McCormick, the general owner, pulled at the ends of his black mustache.

"If I was you, Tom Chance, I'd rather take my chances with Ed Shelley than with us," he said. "Stay here and we will hang you to the rafters of your own hotel."

Linda screamed, but Bat Harbin

grabbed her and held her so that she couldn't run to Tom. Chance saw that Linda was in the direct line of Ed Shelley's gun. If there was shooting, she might be hit. Chance saw the bitter hatred stamped on the faces of the men in the lobby. He clenched and unclenched his stiff right hand. He walked toward Ed Shelley, but he called to Linda over his right shoulder.

"Keep you're chin up, I'll get back some way and prove that Ed Shelley and Bat Harbin are a couple of liars."

Then Tom Chance was in the dark hallway with Ed Shelley and his men. Ed sent a couple of shots into the ceiling. As they moved out the back door, Tom heard Bat Harbin's strident voice.

"Get a posse together," Harbin shouted. "I ain't ridin' with you boys. I know where Shelley's headin'. If I was to come across Tom Chance hangin' by his neck, I reckon there wouldn't be anything I could do about it."

TOM CHANCE heard Linda scream as Ed Shelley forced him into the saddle of his own black gelding. The two other men with Shelley were hard-eyed, double-gunned gents of the open trail. They rode along the bank of the Little Bend River, their horses racing in the night.

The trail pounded upward toward Calico Mountain, the drive of horses' hoofs rocking in the night as the cavalcade swept on. Chance rode easily in the saddle, his eyes cold as the hard light of the stars. He wondered why Shelley had got Chance's own horse from the livery stable. He was not tied, but there was no chance of escape.

Ed Shelley called a halt there at the foot of Calico Mountain, where the Little Bend River roared down by the trail. Shelley's lips were pulled tight and there was a maddening light burning deep in the pits of his eyes.

"This is payoff, Tom," he snapped, his handsome face twisted with hatred. "You and me carry the same brand now. Bat Harbin told it good. The posse will be along any time."

Even as Shelley broke off speech, Chance could hear the distant rattle of hoofs on the trail. Chance looked at Ed Shelley and strength seemed to flow into the stiffened fingers of his right hand. He lashed out at Ed Shelley, but Ed only laughed, and took the blow high on his shoulder. Tom looked into the muzzle of Ed Shelley's gun.

"I've added it up," Chance said. "Bat Harbin was in on the deal. He killed Matlock with my shotgun. Yuh figgered on knockin' down a couple of birds with one shot. Yuh got rid of Matlock, who was too hot on yore trail, and got me tagged with the killin'."

Ed Shelley laughed. "Yuh're right. Now I'm shootin' yore hoss. Yuh'll be afoot. The posse will find you, and yuh'll be hangin' from a cottonwood limb."

Ed Shelley fired a bullet into the head of Tom's horse. The animal gave a convulsive leap and piled up just after Chance managed to get his feet out of the stirrups.

"I'll get yuh for this, Ed," Tom Chance said levelly. "Even if I have to wait for yuh in hell."

One of the owlhooters with Ed Shelley looked nervously back toward Wildhorse. "Let's get outa here," he said.

The roar of the posse was getting louder. Tom Chance stood there in the night blackness, his eyes fixed on Ed Shelley's face.

"Yuh'll never get away with this, Ed," he stated grimly.

But there was confidence in Ed Shelley's voice.

"While yuh're kickin' yore life away at the end of a hang rope, I'll be back in Wildhorse," he said. "Me and Linda are lightin' out for the border. She's waitin' for me. I've got a nice chunk of dinero and we'll buy a little *hacienda* somewheres below the border. I reckon yuh know how things stand between me and Linda. She hid me out in yore own hotel for two days without tellin' yuh. See yuh in hell."

"I'll be there waitin'," Tom vowed.

(Continued on page 106)

ON THE NIGHT OF SEPT. 30, 1876, SERGEANT JOHN B. ARMSTRONG, WITH TEN RANGERS, WAS ENROUTE TO THE CARRIZO FOR ROUTINE DUTY PATROL—

....RUSTLERS--MADE OFF WITH ALL MY CATTLE AND HORSES

THE RANGERS SOON PICKED UP THE TRAIL—

HERE ARE PRINTS IN THE SOFT DIRT!

HEADING FOR LAKE ESPINOZA, I'LL WAGER!

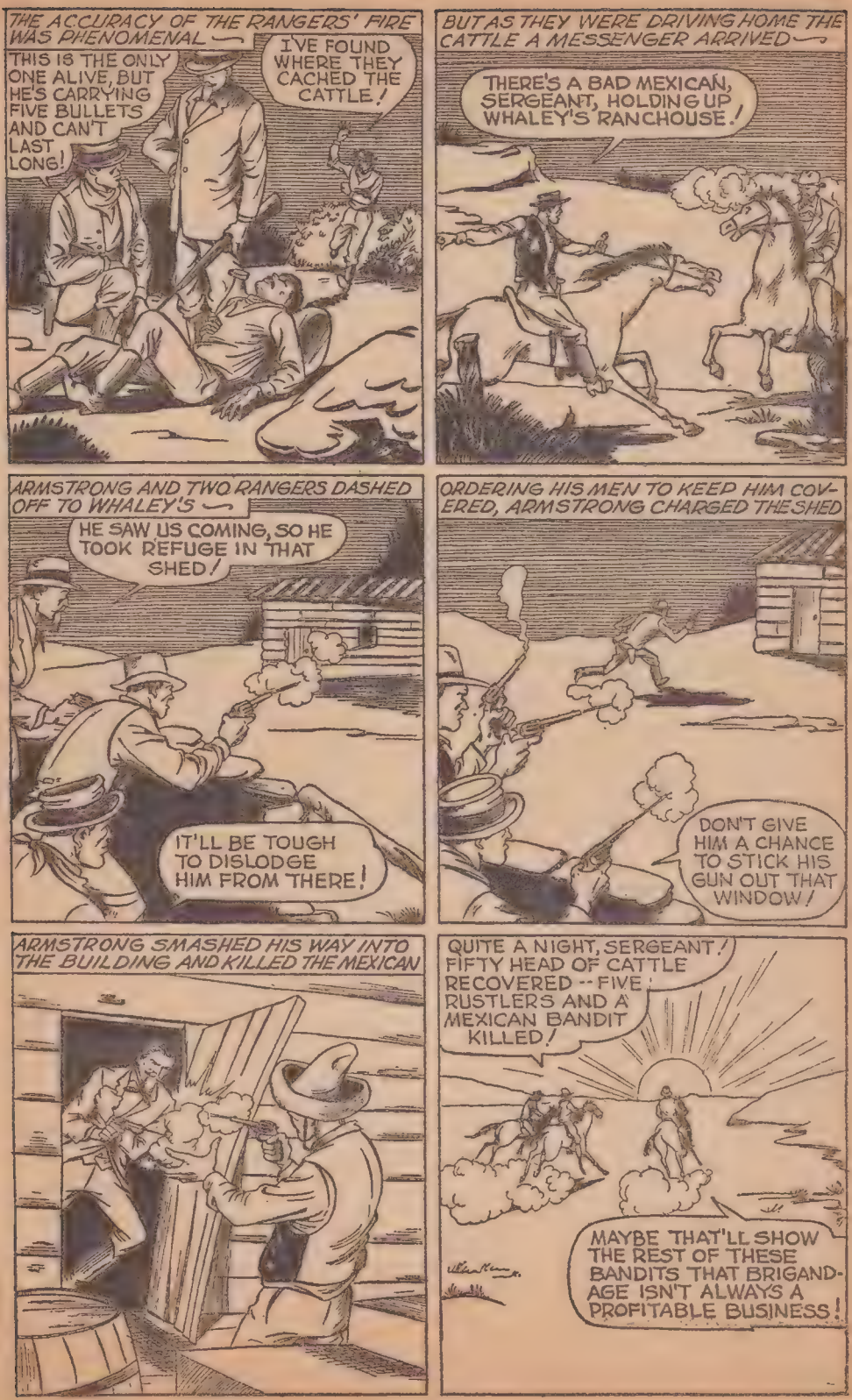
THE RANGERS FOUND THE OUTLAWS ENCAMPED ON THE SHORE OF THE LAKE—

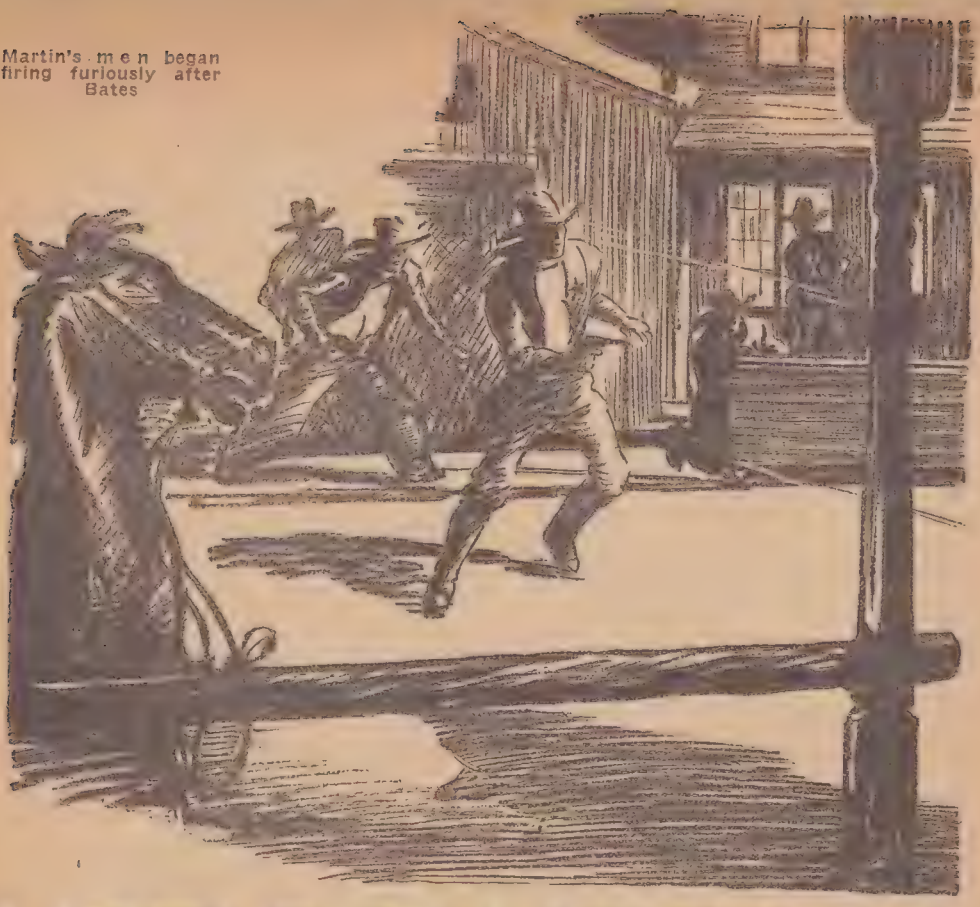
SPREAD OUT, MEN --- WE'LL ATTACK THEM ON FOOT!

WHEN THE RANGERS WERE WITHIN 20 YARDS, THE OUTLAWS OPENED FIRE—

THEY'RE FIRING, BOYS, LET 'EM HAVE IT!

AT ARMSTRONG'S ORDERS THE RANGERS CHARGED—


THE ACCURACY OF THE RANGERS' FIRE WAS PHENOMENAL —
THIS IS THE ONLY ONE ALIVE, BUT HE'S CARRYING FIVE BULLETS AND CAN'T LAST LONG!
I'VE FOUND WHERE THEY CACHED THE CATTLE!
BUT AS THEY WERE DRIVING HOME THE CATTLE A MESSENGER ARRIVED —
THERE'S A BAD MEXICAN, SERGEANT, HOLDING UP WHALEY'S RANCHOUSE!
ARMSTRONG AND TWO RANGERS DASHED OFF TO WHALEY'S —
HE SAW US COMING, SO HE TOOK REFUGE IN THAT SHED!
IT'LL BE TOUGH TO DISLODGE HIM FROM THERE!
ORDERING HIS MEN TO KEEP HIM COVERED, ARMSTRONG CHARGED THE SHED
DON'T GIVE HIM A CHANCE TO STICK HIS GUN OUT THAT WINDOW!
ARMSTRONG SMASHED HIS WAY INTO THE BUILDING AND KILLED THE MEXICAN
QUITE A NIGHT, SERGEANT! FIFTY HEAD OF CATTLE RECOVERED -- FIVE RUSTLERS AND A MEXICAN BANDIT KILLED!
MAYBE THAT'LL SHOW THE REST OF THESE BANDITS THAT BRIGANDAGE ISN'T ALWAYS A PROFITABLE BUSINESS!



Martin's men began firing furiously after Bates

LITTLE DAUGHTER

By WALT GROVE

Author of "The Last Gunslinger," etc.

"Pap" Bates Turns Into a Roaring Gunswift When a Self-Appointed King of the Range Threatens His Girl!

THE dusty trip and ache of time beat bitterly against "Pap" Bates, as his rickety wagon rambled down the street. This is it, he hoped, forcing the hurt out of his throat and smoothing his little four-year-old daughter's hair with a calloused hand. This was where they'd make a fresh start.

Pulling his skittish horse up to the rail, he dropped over the side and tied the reins tight. With little Babe asleep in the wagon seat, he didn't want that fool horse to run away. She was all he had left, now. Without her he wouldn't be worth his salt.

He took a last, proud look at her and then turned toward the store. Even as he walked across the sagging planks and into the gloom of the store, he felt pride surge in his chest. Babe was a beauty, just like her Mom. Long arms hanging awkardly, he stood by the counter, conscious of the men in the store looking him over.

"Yes, sir, stranger," the storekeeper said, coming up. "What can I do for yuh?"

Idly, Bates' hand strayed to the pocket that should have held his tobacco—if he'd had any tobacco. But he brought his arm down awkwardly and let it hang stiffly by his side.

"Need 'bout three bales of barbed-wire," he said quietly, still standing stiff and unmoving.

One of the men sitting by the stove let his chair go down with a bang, and he walked over to Bates. The old-timer still stood there, keeping his face blank. He had known that it would be like this.

"Stranger in these parts, huh?" the man said, surveying Bates closely. The man's face told Bates a lot. That network of lines meant that he had once been poor. His roughened, but well-padded hands toying with a heavy watch-chain told Bates that he had worked up the hard way and was now rich.

"Yeah," Bates answered slowly. The man with the old-leather face pursed his lips, swinging the watch-chain around his forefinger.

"Buying barbed wire, huh?" the man stated more than asked, still looking Bates up and down. And Bates was getting tired of it, which somehow brought on a tiredness of everything that he'd been fighting back.

"Yeah," he answered again, this time not so slow and not so quiet. His face remained blank as he shifted his feet. Inside him that feeling grew. He'd like to take that wind-burned man apart. It wasn't the man exactly, though he didn't like him either.

"Gaines, come here," the man called without turning, his face growing redder.

A long-bodied man arose from the group about the stove and came up to Bates as quietly as a snake. Twin gun-belts crossed the man's hips, and as Bates looked he grew sick. The softness of the man's hands, and the way he held his fingers curled in slightly, told him a lot.

"This is 'Smoke' Gaines," the man went on, putting a hand on the long-bodied man's shoulder. "Yuh've heard of him. There's nobody that can beat his draw. He's famous from Tampico to Nome." A chill ran up Bates' spine. Yes, he'd heard. "I'm Martin and I own the Seven-Eleven ranch," the man went on. And I ain't havin' no wire strung on this range."

"Here's yore wire, stranger," the little storekeeper broke in nervously. His glance darted from Bates to Martin to Gaines, and back again rapidly.

Without answering Martin, Bates turned slowly to the storekeeper, hand in his pocket. Out came a worn purse and silently he paid the little man.

THAT feeling was growing, coming to life inside him. He had to do something quick. He'd never been one to think, and now he'd thought so long about such complex things that he was almost crazy. What he craved and needed now was some physical action. With a grunt he rolled the bale of wire toward the door.

That was better; a lot better. It loosened the tightness inside him. And as he started for the door, Martin was close behind him. But Bates paid no attention to the rancher, and swung the bale of wire powerfully into the wagon. Frowning, Martin stood with Gaines, the gun-snake, on the walk as he looked at Babe sleeping in the wagon.

Trying not to notice either of the men, Bates shouldered past them into the store and returned with the other bale of wire. As he slung it up into the wagon, he started to climb up beside his little daughter. But Martin's voice from the walk stopped him.

"I meant what I said about the wire." The rancher's voice was flat.

Eying the sun-baked man and the gun-snake, Bates pushed back his sweat-stained hat and ran a calloused hand down his faded pants. It was terribly hard to fight back that answer that he couldn't give.

For the first time Smoke Gaines spoke and his voice was as soft and quiet as death.

"Yuh want I should take him, Boss?" Face blank, he looked at Martin, but the rancher shook his head angrily.

"No—not yet." In exasperation Martin turned back to Bates. "Look." he went on loudly, his face getting

redder. "Yuh know what'll happen if yuh buck my outfit. Good Lord, man, I've got almost fifty men working for me! It'll be a snap to scatter yuh from hell to breakfast!"

"Is that all?" Bates finally asked, his voice quiet. Babe stirred sleepily on the wagon seat and his heart twisted. "See that kid, mister? She's all I've got. There's things she'll want in not so many years and I mean to get 'em for her. Cattle baron or no cattle baron!"

Martin swore softly. "Don't be a fool, man," he grumbled. "If yuh string one foot of that wire, I'll run yuh from here to Mexico! I don't want that range fenced in, and you ain't goin' be the jasper that starts it. Try it if yuh want to go bust!"

Without answering, Bates swung up into the wagon, took the reins in his hands. Babe was half-awake, cuddling sleepily against him. With her warm little body pressing against his leg, he knew that he couldn't fail.

"We'll see, Martin." His voice was like a rock, as he pulled the horse into the street.

"Yuh fool!" Martin flung after him. "Yuh can't buck me! I'm goin' to run yuh out of this country! I'm goin' to bust yuh, do yuh hear?"

Fighting against the urge to go back and break Martin and his gunswift in two, Bates clucked to the horse as the wagon bumped down the street. Babe was awake now, those wide blue eyes of hers staring at everything. She was asking a thousand questions and somehow he answered them.

A red mist was in front of his eyes. Old Pap Bates knew that he was driving the wagon in the right direction, but he wasn't conscious of anything else. Just that blood drumming in his ears. A man wouldn't take what Martin had given him, but there was little Babe to consider. He was her father, the one who cared for her.

Finally, the mist lifted and he began to identify a few landmarks. That half-section ought to be about here. And it was, for he found the marker at last. Unhitching the old, skittish horse from his wreck of a wagon, he went about making a temporary camp. Always, he kept Babe close beside him. The rattlers were pretty bad and she might get bitten.

AFTER a long time it was night and the stars were out. Their fire was just a smoldering coal, and Babe was nestling against his shoulder. But he could only sit there and worry, and he was so sick of thinking. He'd thought so long and so hard.

"Pap," little Babe's voice was soft and warm, "are we home now?"

"Yes, Honey, we're home." A strange surge of power shot through him. Home, after all that travel and heartbreak. Little Babe needed a home. He'd give her one or he'd die trying. "Time to go to bed, Honey," he told her then.

He carried her to the wagon, her small body warm in his arms, and made a bed for her. Silently he listened while she said her prayers, then he went achingly back to the fire.

There was a time when he wouldn't have taken a thing Martin had said to him. But that was all changed now. Babe's mother was dead, and that little ranch they had owned was gone. All he had was this homestead, this half section of wild land. And Babe, she was his life.

Stirring the remains of the fire with a stick, he began to feel good again. All the living he'd get now would be wrapped up in her. All the fun he'd missed, she would have. There'd be nothing that he wouldn't give her. His little girl.

Pride surged through him as he walked slowly over to the wagon and crawled into his blankets beside Babe, who was breathing gently and regularly. There was a choked feeling inside him. But, finally, he went to sleep, thinking of what he was going to do for Babe.

When he woke up, Babe was sitting astride his chest, poking him with her heels. Those blue eyes of hers were dancing with laughter. With a grunt he sat up and hugged her to him.

"Mornin', Honey," he said. "Feel like breakfast?" Poking her gently in the ribs he grinned at her.

"Yes, Pap," she answered. And then: "Where's our house, Pap? Where are we goin' to live, huh?"

Still grinning at her, he pointed toward a tree, plans forming rapidly in his mind.

"See that tree?" he said. And at her childish nod: "Right there I'm goin' to build us a house. But first let's see what's for breakfast." And he went rummaging through his supplies, lighting a fire, and fixing things to eat.

All that day he worked hard, fencing off a small piece of land for a garden. That day and the next and the next for a whole week he worked on the garden. In the spring his crops would be up and then Babe would have fresh vegetables. Not once did he let her leave his side. When he dug holes for fence posts, she sat in the shade of a tree and laughed at him.

And as he dug the celler of this sod house, she squatted on the ground above and asked a thousand questions. Her interest made the work light. When he felt tired he had only to look at her and then go back to his work with a fierce vigor.

For three weeks it was like that. And at the end of that time he had fenced in his land, built a sod house, and started on a well. There was a stream that he meant to use for the cattle. At the present time, the cattle consisted of one cow. But at the end of three weeks, when he went to bed one night, he was satisfied. It had been hard work, but it was worth it.

The next morning when he awoke, Babe was still asleep. Tucking the covers closer around her, he pulled on his boots and walked to the door. Throwing it open he sucked the fresh, spring breeze into his lungs. Chest expanded, arms thrown back, he looked over his land—and sickness exploded inside him.

Almost wanting to cry, he stepped out the door, took three staggering steps toward the garden. There, in that beautiful garden that he'd planted for Babe, all hell had broken loose. The wire was down, the fence posts uprooted, and the half-grown vegetables strewn over the ground.

Eyes smarting, his chest began to heave with rage. Martin had done this. Martin, the bloated range-king and his blasted hired gunman!

Sickly, he looked at the rest of his place. As far as he could see the wire was down and the fence posts broken off or pulled out of the ground. A blind, red mist was settling in front of his eyes.

Bates walked dumbly toward that half-dug well. It was caved in. All his work had gone for nothing. And in a clump of brush, over by a tree, he found his cow, his one and only cow. It had been shot through the head, lying there dead, flies buzzing around the dried blood.

Shaking with rage and bitterness, he stumbled around the half-section. The only thing left was the sod house. Martin and his raiders that came in the night hadn't wanted to wake him. The wagon shafts were broken, the bed broken in. And he could only guess as to where the horse was.

Stumbling, shaken so with emotion that he hardly knew what he was doing, Pap Bates sank down by the well. He grabbed a handful of earth, clenched it hard in his hand. Martin, the range king. Martin, the cattle baron. Martin, the man that had everything, had taken what little he had.

HE'D kill Martin for this. That beefy rancher would never live to see the sun rise again. Somehow he'd fight his way past Smoke Gaines to Martin and kill that lord of the range. Savagely Bates swore it. And as he did so his thoughts drummed up inside him, telling him:

"No—you can't!"

For there was little Babe. Dumbly, he stared at the earth in his hand. Gaines was a professional gunman—he'd kill him. What would happen to little Babe then? No, he couldn't go hell-raising over to Martin's place.

He just couldn't do it. Bitterness and hatred for Martin welled up in him, drumming the blood ino his ears. Almost sobbing, he beat a calloused fist against his faded Levis. Why did this have to happen? Couldn't he just get along with people?

Bates didn't ask for much—just a half-section that would give him enough to live on. Martin had so many thousands of acres. It wasn't fair. For an instant he had to squeeze his eyes shut hard, swallow many times. Then he began to think, to make his tired brain function slowly.

As much as he wanted to, he couldn't shoot Martin, for surely Gaines' .45's would get him. So, for little Babe's sake, he couldn't do it. But should he try to stick it out? Or should he move on before Martin got it in his head to kill him?

Bates shook his head, not knowing. But he decided to give it another try. If Martin got real tough, then he could push on. Maybe the cattle baron might give up. Slowly, he looked around the ranch, taking stock of what he would need.

Wire, some more seed for another garden, and a cow, if anyone would sell one. He could fix the wagon himself, and he'd have to hunt up the horse. Also, he could always dig another well. His thoughts pressing down on him, he walked back to the sod house and found Babe awake, dressing herself.

"Mornin', Pap," she greeted, running to him and kissing him. Then she turned around. "Button me up in the back."

"Mornin', Honey." His thick fingers fumbled with the small buttons. Babe was standing there so little and trusting. He just couldn't let her down. If he did he was the worst kind of dog alive.

AS he fixed breakfast, he tried to be cheerful and joke with Babe. But it was a hard thing to do. His work had all been for nothing—and that was hard to take. Then they finished breakfast and Babe did what she called "helpin' with the dishes."

Then they went outside. He swung Babe up on his shoulders, picked up a rope and started on a search for his horse. It was a hard job, but he finally found the skittish old nag and roped him. Then they went back to the ranch and he fixed the wagon. Babe still "helpin'."

It was hard work, and he had to stop in the middle of it to give Babe her lunch. While she was eating, he went savagely back to his work, fitting new shafts on the wagon. He half fixed the bed, and then got Babe and started for town. He had to get that new barbed-wire.

So Martin didn't like barbed-wire, huh? Well, he'd give that dirty son so much wire that he'd scream.

They bumped along the wagon trail, Babe close to him, smiling up at him now and then and asking all kinds of questions. He tried to answer them as best he could.

It was a long and hot ride into town, and when they got there it was mid-afternoon. He knew that he'd have to get his wire and rush right back to the ranch. As the rickety wagon rambled down the street, three men came banging out a saloon door, shooting their .45's into the air.

Then he saw all the horses at the rack, saw the Seven-Eleven brand on them. A bitter lump came up in his throat. Martin and his men were in town. But he forced it down somehow, tried to remain calm. More cowpokes flooded into the street as he pulled his wagon up to the hitch-rack.

"Sit in the wagon, Honey," he cautioned Babe, and then went to tie the horse up. A man sitting in front of the store spat a brown stream of tobacco juice into the dust and it splashed near him.

"How's the homesteadin' goin', stranger?" The man grinned slyly at him.

Savagely, Bates flipped the reins over the rack and strode toward the man. Jerking him up from his chair he slammed a fist into the man's face. And the fellow went down like he'd been hit with an axe.

Rubbing his fist, Bates went into the store. The little storekeeper advanced on him, rubbing his hands together.

"Yes, sir," he greeted. "What can I do for yuh today?"

"I want some more wire," Bates said slowly, looking straight into the little man's eyes as they blinked nervously twice.

Swallowing, the storekeeper managed a grin and ducked into the back room. Bates remained standing, arms hanging stiff and tired down his sides.

"Well I'll be blasted!"

Turning around, Bates saw Martin standing in the doorway, slack-jawed. The rancher had Smoke Gaines with him, and Gaines and his guns. Outside he could hear the rest of Martin's men running up and down the street, firing their .45's. Slowly the range king advanced.

"Are you *still* here?" the rancher went on, as if he couldn't believe his eyes. Bates stood there, stiff and hating. If Babe wasn't outside in that wagon he'd crack Martin in two across his knee. "What does it take to get rid of yuh?" Martin growled.

"I got permission from the U. S. Government to homestead that land," Bates said quietly, holding himself in check. "Yuh can't buck them, mister. And since I aim to homestead, there's nothing yuh can do."

"Oh, there isn't, huh?" Martin advanced, hands on his hips, jaw jutting out. "Well, yuh'll see. Think that job we pulled last night was good, huh? All right, you wait. As fast as yuh put wire up, we can take it down. And I'll outlast yuh. Yuh can't beat me!"

"Mebbe I can." Jaw muscles hard, Bates turned from the rancher to the storekeeper, who was rolling a bale of wire toward him. The little man darted a glance from Martin to Bates and back again.

"Here's yore wire," he said.

"Wire?" Martin bellowed. "I forbid yuh to sell that wire! This homesteader don't need it. Don't sell it to him, or I'll run yuh out of town!"

SILENTLY, Bates opened up his purse and paid the storekeeper, who was so nervous he could hardly take the money.

"But, Mister Martin," the little man's voice shook out, "I got to sell it to somebody."

"All right then!" Martin's face was red. "I'll buy all yuh got left! Ever bale of it! Anything, so this squatter don't get any more." Savagely, he swung on Bates. "Now will yuh get out? Or do I have to shoot holes through that thick head of yores?"

"Look," Bates' voice was hoarse as he glared back at Martin, "Yuh've got everything, I've got nothing. Nothing but my little girl. And that homestead is for her. You, nor anyone else, can run me out. Chew that awhile!"

"Yeah?" His face ugly, Martin came up closer. "Yuh fool! I can't run yuh off? Listen, I don't have to. I can kill yuh and no one'll give a hoot. But I was making it easy for yuh because yuh got a kid. Now, do yuh want to stay and die—or run and live?"

Bates clenched his fists down at his sides hard. Nostrils flaring, he glanced at Martin, saw that the rancher was standing to one side and a little in front of Smoke Gaines. A chill shook through him. Just looking at Gaines made him cold all over.

So he just stood there, shaking with rage, unable to do a thing. If he tried anything now, Gaines would kill him. And what about Babe? He couldn't die and leave her alone in the world. Dumbly, he shook his head, wanting to kill Martin in the worst way.

"All right," he muttered hoarsely, dropping his hands helplessly. "I'll run."

Smoke Gaines came over to him, grabbed his battered hat and sailed it out the door—straight into the face of Bates' skittish horse! The horse pitched between the wagon shafts, the hastily tied reins came loose, and the horse raced wildly off down the street! A runaway with little Babe in the wagon!

Agony shot through Bates at the sight, but he had already thrown himself at Gaines. Hate, fear, anger fused together and put a strength in him that no one could best. Gaines had his gun out, but Bates twisted the gunman's wrist savagely.

A shot boomed through the store, and the slug splintered the floor at Bates' feet. The great cords in his neck swelling, he bent Gaines' arm back as if he were a child. The gun exploded again, just as the gunman's wrist snapped. A scream died in

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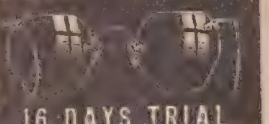

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Gaines' throat. His own slug had buried itself high in his chest.

As the gunman slumped down, Bates twisted the .45 from his hand, going straight for Martin. The rancher's weathered face had a look of terror in it, and his hand flashed inside his coat. But it never came out. That driving urge to kill anybody that stood between him and the runaway rocketed Bates straight into Martin.

Furiously, he hammered the .45 into Martin's face and the rancher dropped like a log. Somehow, Bates had got his hand entangled in the rancher's heavy watch-chain. Going for the door, he tried vainly to shake it off. But it was entwined around his wrist in a manner that kept it there. And there was a small knot of Seven-Eleven men just outside the door.

As he burst through the door, gun in hand, going like the devil's own wrath, they broke. One man faced him, gun belching, and lead chewed at the door frame. Automatically, Bates snapped his gun down, let the hammer fall with his thumb, and the man spun backwards. The other men had scattered to places of protection.

BUT Bates never gave them a thought. Like a shot he was beside a horse tied to the rack. He had to get to little Babe. Fiercely, he clawed at the reins, and as he tried to swing aboard a gun hurled a slug at him. It caught him high in the shoulder and with a sledge-hammer savageness smashed him to the ground.

Another shot hit beside him, spewing dust in his eyes. Frantically, he dug at his eyes while he came up out of the dust in a half crouch. The man shot again, and Bates leveled his gun at a second-story window, triggering lead at the man with a rifle. The man threw up his hands, rifle clattering to the ground, and he slumped over the window sill.

Grabbing the saddle-horn, Bates vaulted into the saddle, his heart hammering like mad. As he kicked the horse away from the rack and down the street, lead whined all around him. But he only pounded onward, trying desperately to get to little Babe. Leaning far over on the horse's

neck, he tried to shield himself from the hail of lead.

Guns blasting, a Seven-Eleven man jumped into the center of the street in front of his charging horse. Bates swerved his mount slightly, snapped a shot at the man from under the animal's neck. As the man slumped to the ground, he pounded on by. Nothing could stop him now. He had to get to little Babe!

That heated gun battle had spent precious minutes—minutes that could have been used in getting to little Babe. Bates rode stiff and unbending. Now, when he needed to most, he couldn't unloosen. The habit of years had made him face things firmly and strongly, even if he was rotting inside.

He was so scared that he wouldn't find her alive, he could hardly breathe. As he cursed himself for being a fool, fierce emotion surged through him. He just couldn't lose her. He couldn't! If Babe and her Mom were both gone, what good would he be?

Suddenly, the road turned sharply and he lifted his head. For one terrible, blind instant, he was afraid to look. But then he was around the bend, looking, and jerking his horse to a squatting, dust-raising stop. The wagon was there, tipped up in a ditch!

But what really sent his heart pounding high and hard was little Babe's voice!

"Horse," her childish treble came to him, "get the wagon out of the ditch. Horse, do you hear me? Get! Get!"

Frantically, Bates slid out of the saddle, pounded breathlessly around the wagon and stopped. Chest heaving, he could only stare at little Babe. She was standing with her hands on her hips, frowning at the horse.

"Horse," she repeated, then she saw her father. "Pap! The old horse won't get the wagon out of the ditch!"

Grinning now, Bates stepped forward, swooped her up in his arms.

"Oh, Honey," he choked, holding her close, squeezing her tight. Her little arms were around his neck and she gave him a wet kiss on the cheek.

"The horse got scared," she confided, and then he had to laugh at

[*Turn page*]

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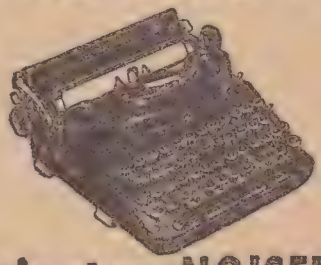

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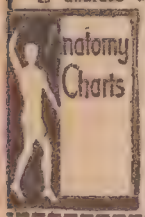

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himself. But it was a weak, scared sort of laugh. When he thought of what could have happened— Eyes smarting, memories tore at him. Old and sweet memories and thoughts of little Babe and her Mom. He remembered the night she was born. How proud he'd been! And the night Mom had died, and how grief-stricken he'd been. And when Babe took her first step . . . her first word . . . her first tooth.

Choking, he swallowed hard, and dug at his eyes with his fists. But he tried hard to grin at her. Even though it hurt like anything, it was a pleasant, warm sort of hurt.

"Babe," he said, and his voice sounded hollow in his own ears, "Yuh just scared the living daylights out of me." Shaking his head he still tried to laugh, but he couldn't. It had been too awful.

"Was you scared, Pap?" Babe asked, her blue eyes wide. Putting a little hand on his chin she tilted his head up and kissed him. "I'm sorry, Pap, but the old horse ran and ran."

"YES, Honey," he admitted weakly, "I know." Then he swung her up on the wagon seat and took the reins. "Let's get the horse goin'."

Clucking his tongue cheerfully he eased the wagon out of the ditch and headed it back toward town. Quickly, he tied the saddle horse on behind and vaulted into the wagon seat. He took Martin's watch-chain off his wrist and stuck it in his pocket. He'd return that right now. Strangely, though, he was trembling.

"Don't be scared, Pap," Babe told him, cuddling close. "I'm all right. I'm with you."

There was a choked, happy feeling in his chest as he managed to grin down through a blur at her. Playfully, he touseled her blond hair and pulled her against him.

Laughing like that, they rode into town and once more he hitched the horse at the rack. Only this time, he swung little Babe up on his shoulder and stomped into the store. The sight of Martin sitting on a grain sack, handkerchief pressed to his battered face stopped him. He'd forgotten about the fight.

"Mister, please leave us alone," the little storekeeper begged, clutching at his coat. But Bates shoved the little man back. This was the showdown. He looked the little man straight in the eye, his heart pounding hard in his chest.

"I want a box of Forty-five shells and three bales of barbed-wire," he said.

"Mister, have a heart," the little storekeeper pleaded. "Yuh know Mister Martin bought it all up." But as Bates took a step toward him, the little man scurried like a scared rat into the back of the store. With a groan Martin stood up, still holding his face.

His face expressionless, Bates handed him his watch-chain. Hardly looking at it, Martin took it, held it clumsily in his hand as he pressed the handkerchief to his face.

"Look, Bates," the rancher almost begged, "what will yuh take to go away someplace where people want trouble? I don't want yuh around here. I'll buy that homestead from yuh if yuh'll go." Pleading, the big rancher stood there. It was so funny that Bates had to laugh.

"I want the homestead," he told Martin once more. And the rancher started to swear, but caught himself as he saw Babe.

"All right, all right," Martin conceded. "Any man that can beat Gaines to his own guns ain't to be fooled with. And say, do yuh want to ride my north line for me? There's where yore fence will be."

"Ride yore line?" It was like a dash of cold water on Bates' brain. "Why, shore. But why me?"

Martin's swollen face split into a grin.

"Yuh've got my outfit cowed," he confided, "and no other man but me ever done that. And with you on my north boundary I know that no one will ever get past."

Swallowing hard, Bates tried to get the dryness out of his throat.

"Honey," he whispered, squeezing little Babe, "we're all right now." She was looking intently at Martin.

"The old horse ran away with me," she informed the rancher, and Martin threw back his head in a laugh. The little storekeeper was rolling in the bales of wire. [*Turn page*]

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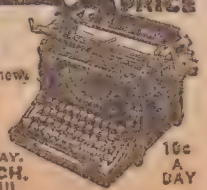

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But Bates could only stand there and think. He knew that if the runaway had not occurred he would never have been able to smash Smoke Gaines down. Never again would he be keyed up like he had been then. But he grinned and kept quiet as Martin helped him shove the wire out the door and into the wagon.

The little storekeeper came running after them, yelling plaintively:

"Mister Bates, yuh forgot yore Forty-five shells!"

JAILBIRD

(Continued from page 93)

He saw the three riders fire their guns in the air, and saw the jets of flame that spurted from the muzzles.

"That'll bring the posse on the double quick," Ed Shelley said with a laugh. "Let's go boys."

They rode into the mountain gloom and disappeared, doubling back toward Wildhorse.

Chance headed for the brush. He thought bitterly of men like Jeff Kane and Harry McCormick who were riding to put a noose around his neck. Hot anger crawled his veins as he thought of what Ed Shelley had said about Linda. That old jealousy swept over him. Was Linda merely playing a game, waiting back there at the hotel for Ed Shelley to take her to Mexico?

Then Chance shook off those thoughts and grimly determined to finish Ed Shelley once and for all. But here he was five miles from Wildhorse. His mount was dead and a posse at this very moment tearing across the meadow.

HE KNEW the posse would find his own dead horse and immediately spread out, hunting for him. They were more interested in nabbing him than they were on getting their hands on Ed Shelley.

Tom Chance had spent many hours, when he was a boy, swimming in Little Bend River. That experience would come in handy now. He kicked off his boots, tore his shirt from his back and dived in, just as a dozen riders pulled up there in the meadow.

"It's Tom's hoss!" he heard one of the men yell. "Fell out with Shelley

most likely. Let's run him down."

But already the cold, icy waters of Little Bend River were closing over the head of Tom Chance. The swift current ripped his body away from shore carrying him to mid-stream. He gasped for breath and fought his way to the surface. His battered head ached. He saw a dim light in the meadow and knew somebody had a lantern and that the posse was searching for his tracks.

The wild, raging current of Little Bend River carried Chance swiftly toward Wildhorse. There was only one thought crowding his mind as he battled the river. That was to get Ed Shelley and shoot him down like the mad dog that he was. And Linda. She couldn't still be in love with Ed Shelley.

It seemed hours later that Chance struck out for the shore, and pulled himself dripping and cold up on the bank behind the hotel in Wildhorse.

The river had given him an awful battering. He staggered to his feet and made a lurching run toward the rear of the hotel. The cut on his

[*Turn page*]

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head made him dizzy but with grim determination he kept on. Ed Shelley's horse was tied to the railing on the rear steps. The other two members of the gang must have high-tailed it, Chance thought. He had no weapon and if he met Shelley, the gunman would kill him.

A single finger of yellow light showed beneath the shade of the kitchen window. Rocks cut into his feet as he crossed the yard. He stood on tiptoe looking into the kitchen. The window was up and he could hear as well as see. And what he heard brought his hopes and dreams down in a crashing jumble.

Linda and Ed Shelley were there. They were both laughing and Tom felt the blood in his veins run to water as he heard Shelley talking.

"The posse has got him by now. He's hangin'. I guess he knows now there ain't nothin' can stop Ed Shelley when he wants something. I've always wanted you."

Linda's laugh was a little forced, Tom thought.

"The fool, the poor, poor fool," she was saying.

In one split second, Tom Chance felt that his one remaining interest in life was gone forever—Linda. Losing his gun hand had been bad enough. Finding Linda again had seemed to make up for other things. Now she was gone, too. Going to help Ed Shelley spend his share of eighteen thousand dollars south of the Rio Grande.

WET and cold, his muscles aching from the smashing blows of the river, Tom Chance hung on for just one instant there at the kitchen window.

Linda was talking again. "I have to get something, Ed. Wait a minute."

She turned back, and Tom could see that her face was as white as her starched apron. Ed Shelley waited for her at the door, his dark eyes drinking the curves of her slender figure.

Then Chance wanted to cry out as a surging rush of new life crowded through his body. For Linda had turned and there was a derringer in

her hand—a wicked looking little gun that could knock the life out of a man.

"You killed Tom," she sobbed. "I only hid you because you promised that if you could stay here for a day you wouldn't harm Tom. If Tom's hand wasn't stiff he'd face you with a gun and blow your rotten heart out of your body. My father always liked and trusted you, but he didn't know what a lying coward you really are. It's too bad he died before he found out."

Chance was through the rear kitchen doors before she had finished.

"Duck!" he yelled at Linda, for Ed Shelley was digging for his gun.

Chance had a glimpse of Ed's dark face and saw the baffled look stamped there at seeing his old enemy facing him once again. Ed Shelley had Linda by the arm twisting the derringer out of her hand. The weapon clattered among knives and forks on the table and fell to the floor.

"I don't know how yuh made it, but it ain't doin' yuh any good," Shelley snapped.

Then he pulled Linda into the hotel lobby, using the girl's body as a shield. He thumbed two quick shots at Tom Chance. Tom went sideways on one knee, heard the jangle of glass as bullets took out the upper part of the window. Shelley and Linda were gone and Tom grabbed the derringer.

And then Bat Harbin was in one doorway, two canvas sacks with the words, "Gypsy Gal Mine" stamped on their sides. Harbin had come down the back stairs from Shelley's hide-out room on the second floor.

His greenish eyes widened and his fat hands went for his gun the instant he dropped the bags. Harbin was surprised.

Tom Chance came to his feet, brought the derringer with him. The gun exploded just above Harbin's belt line and the man stopped as if hit with a club. His features loosened and he sank down and lay on his face, blood running across the scrubbed floor of the kitchen. The man who wore a marshal's star and was crooked as the bed of Little Bend River was down.

[*Turn page*]

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It wasn't until he had thrown away the smoking derringer and grabbed one of Harbin's guns, that Chance entered the lobby. In the dim light he saw Ed Shelley standing there, Linda held in front of him. His pallid features were twisted in anger.

"Drop that gun, Tom, you ain't got a chance. One shot and yuh'll hit Linda."

TOM came up short, indecision stamped on his face. He saw Linda's eyes flashing.

"Kill him, Tom, kill him," she cried.

Tom Chance laughed. "So yuh're the great Ed Shelley, the tough hombre who sticks up trains, but has to do his shootin' from behind a woman."

Ed Shelley twisted his lips queerly. He shoved Linda roughly aside.

"All right. Stick that gun in yore belt and I'll pouch mine," he said. "I'll give you an even break, more than I ever gave any man. Linda goes with the gent that's left standin'. That right, Linda?"

The girl hesitated, and then nodded, a triumphant look in her eyes.

Tom Chance stood there barefoot, water from Little Bend River dripping off his body. His head ached and the fingers of his stiff right hand were stiffer than usual from the cold and icy water of the river. His teeth were chattering and he knew he didn't have much of a chance.

But he looked at Linda and knew that he had to go through with it. There was a reckless grin on his face. Tom worked his fingers and tried to get the stiffness out of them.

The gun felt cold against his skin, stuck there in the top of his soggy pants.

"Let's go, Ed," Chance said, and braced his body against the shock of a bullet.

Linda ran to the hotel desk there in the lobby and Tom saw her pulling on the rope that held the chandelier.

Ed Shelley saw the movement and he went for his gun. Tom Chance had seen that look on many another man's face. Ed Shelley's hands slashed down. Tom's fingers touched the gun butt and he knew he would never make it.

There was a terrific crash and the

floor shook. With his gun half out of leather, Ed Shelley whirled. The smashed chandelier lay in a heap behind him.

It had only taken the splintered part of a second for Linda to slip the rope off the peg and send the big wooden circle of bracket lamps and brass chains down.

That brief instant, when Shelley had turned, gave Tom Chance the break he needed.

Ed Shelley's gun was out, the muzzle stabbing smoke. But Tom Chance had his own gun working. His first bullet drove Ed Shelley into the big horsehair sofa in the lobby.

The second slug brought Shelley to his knees.

The only two slugs Ed Shelley managed to shake out, before he died, went into the ceiling. Plaster dribbled down and formed two dusty mounds of white there on the floor.

WHEN the posse came back to town, it didn't take them long to get the straight of things, especially since Linda had loaded Tom's scattergun and threatened to shoot everyone of them if they didn't listen. When she had finished, Harry McCormick unpinned the marshal's badge from Bat Harbin's shirt front and handed it to Tom Chance. Harbin wasn't dead, but he was plenty scared and anxious to talk.

Tom Chance turned the gold badge over in his hand and shook his head.

"No thanks, boys, I appreciate it but my marshalin' days are over," he said. "This Wildhorse hotel is up for sale. Just as soon as me and Linda can find a buyer, we're gettin' married and lookin' around for some good land and a few cows. I reckon we'll be glad to get back to ranchin'. Runnin' a hotel is just too plumb complicated at times."

NEXT ISSUE'S NOVEL

SIX-GUN HILLS

By

JACKSON COLE

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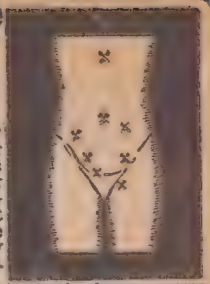

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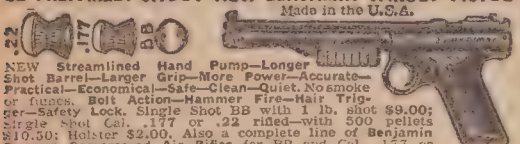

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THE FRONTIER POST

(Continued from page 12)

Mexico's national emblem, along with **aguila,** the two rasslin' together, so I reckon **aguila** is glad that a or b wasn't correct

7. POLLO. a is correct. Two ll's sound sort of like y. So it's poh-yo. A good one to remember when you see that famous Spanish dish, **arroz con pollo,** on the menu. (Rice and chicken.) But don't get it mixed up with the next one because—

8. PERO. b is correct. A lady dog is pera. The ending of a noun generally denotes gender, o being the masculine form, a the feminine. In whistling to a **pero,** you whistle just the same in border lingo.

9. PAJARO (pah-hay-ro). c is correct. Two birds you hear a lot about are the swallow (la golondrina) and the dove (la paloma), favorite songs of those names being sung about each. **Gaviota** (seagull) and **gallo** (rooster) haven't bobbed up in song yet. **Pollo, pero** and **pajaro**—get 'em down pat so you won't whistle to a chicken, order dog in a restaurant or sing a love song about a rooster.

10. PESCADO. a is correct. **Pescado muy grande,** very big fish. The one that got away, in other words.

11. VACA. a is correct. The v sounds like b, so it's bah-cah. Other member o' the family is **toro,** bull. **Toreador,** bullfighter.

12. ZAPILOTE. c is correct. (Sah-poh-tay). He's not handsome but he's useful—in a bad year when the creeks dry and the range **vacas** die. Don't get him mixed up with **zapadero,** shoemaker.

All of those dozen words you'd have use for if you was a new Ranger makin' a ride along the border to collect up a hoss thief on orders from your Captain. Right soon you'd grow to like the musical sound o' the lingo and you'd crave to learn more.

How Lingo Savvy Grows

Mebbeso you'd find a rider going your way. Thusly, you'd have a *compañero,* companion, who'd teach you some more words.

You'd learn to speak of the weather—heat, cold, sun, wind, rain and clouds. You'd understand when rivers, hills and mountain passes were mentioned.

Before many days, you'd be hooking some words together into phrases of greeting, simple questions of direction. Then eating

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lingo—please-pass-the-potatoes and such.

Next, you'd roll up a bunch of words into sentences. You'd make some funny mistakes at first. But you'd learn. Mebbeso, by the time you got back to your post with your prisoner you'd have a lot of lingo savvy.

That's the way most Texas Rangers learned that pleasant and useful language that's heard almost as much as English along the Rio Grande!

Be seeing you, hombres!

—CAPTAIN STARR.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

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—THE EDITOR.

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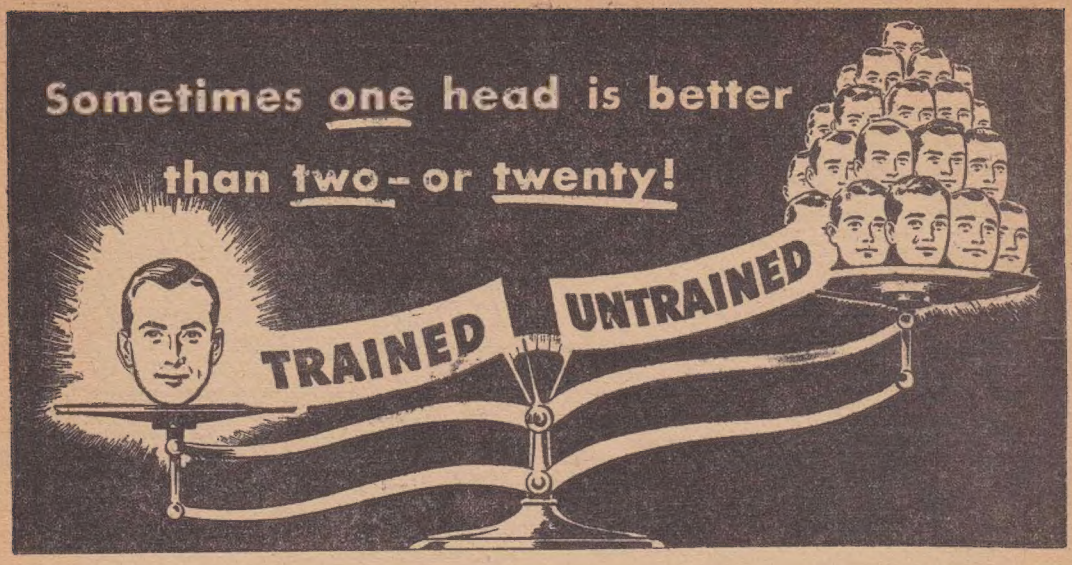

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SEND NO MONEY FOR THIS AMAZING NEW HAIR COLORING

Mail Coupon on Guarantee Results Must Delight You or No Cost

Tintz' chemists have at last perfected an amazing new hair coloring method. It is a creme shampoo containing genuine PARAPHENYLENE DIAMINE, the best hair coloring agent known to mankind! Tintz Creme Shampoo Hair Coloring *instantly* colors all gray, streaked, faded hair right in your own home to a natural-like, lasting color that matches and defies detection. Won't wash off or run off. Positively will not affect permanent waves. Leaves hair soft—easy to manage.

CHOICE OF 8 LOVELY SHADES

JET BLACK—BLACK—DARK BROWN
MED. WARM BROWN—MED. DRAB BROWN
LIGHT BROWN—AUBURN (TITIAN)—BLONDE

We want you to try Tintz Creme Shampoo Hair Coloring. We want you to take advantage of this special introductory offer and mail the coupon today. Send no money.. On arrival of package, deposit only $1 plus postage and tax with postman. READ THE CAUTION—Use Only as Directed on Label—then shampoo-tint your own hair right in your own home. We are sure just one trial will convince anyone who wishes to dye their own hair that here at last is the hair coloring of their dreams! But if for any reason you wish to return the empty Tintz package, and you alone are the judge, do so in 7 days. We will immediately refund your $1 and tax without question. This is today's big offer to anyone who wishes to INSTANTLY color hair! Don't delay but mail the coupon now—sure!

SHAMPOOING SPREADS COLOR EVENLY. It is impossible to do a blotchy job with Tintz Creme Shampoo Hair Coloring. If you can follow easy directions—results are guaranteed. Tintz contains PARAPHENYLENE DIAMINE—the best hair coloring agent known.

MAIL THIS COUPON TODAY SURE

TINTZ CO., Dept. 700, 205 N. Michigan, Chicago, Ill.
Canadian Office: Dept. 700, 22 College Street, Toronto, Ont.

Send one full size tube Tintz Creme Shampoo Hair Coloring in shade checked below. On arrival I will deposit the special introductory offer price of $1.00 plus 10% tax and postage charges with postman on guarantee I can return the empty tube for any reason within 7 days, and you will refund my $1 and tax. (If money comes with order, Tintz pays the postage.) ☐ 3 for $2.50 plus 10% Federal Excise Tax.

☐ Jet Black ☐ Dark Brown ☐ Med. Drab Brown ☐ Auburn (Titian)
☐ Black ☐ Med. Warm Brown ☐ Light Brown ☐ Blonde

Name .....
Print Plainly
Address .....
City ..... *State* .....

One LIFE INSURANCE POLICY INSURES YOUR ENTIRE FAMILY!

TOTAL COST

Only $1 A MONTH

PAYS FOR ALL

INSURES PARENTS, CHILDREN (Married or Unmarried) BROTHERS, SISTERS and GRANDPARENTS . . . Ages 1 to 65

★ Now, modern life insurance methods make it possible for *all* of your family, including in-laws, to be insured in one policy paying guaranteed benefits for death from any cause.

Instead of issuing five or six policies to include mother, father, sons and daughters, even grandparents, we now issue just one policy that insures them all . . . and at one low cost price of only $1.00 a month.

Guarantee Reserve

FAMILY POLICY

INSURES FROM 2 to 6 MEMBERS OF YOUR FAMILY

$1,422.00	For Natural or Ordinary Accidental Death
$2,844.00	For Auto Accidental Death
$4,266.00	For Travel Accidental Death

The figures shown above represent the insurance provided by the policy on a typical average family of five persons.

GUARANTEE RESERVE LIFE INSURANCE COMPANY
DEPARTMENT 17-B, HAMMOND, INDIANA

NO AGENT WILL CALL

10-DAY FREE INSPECTION OFFER

SEND NO MONEY

COMPUTED ON LEGAL RESERVE BASIS

To guarantee payment on each death that occurs in your insured family, we have figured this policy out on the strict legal reserve basis, complying with State government requirements in every respect. This is your assurance of *Cash When You Need It Most.* Claims are paid at once . . . without argument or delay. State records verify our fair and just settlements.

Guarantee Reserve specializes in full family coverage, that's why we can offer safe, guaranteed life insurance on your whole family at one low price of only $1.00 a month.

NO MEDICAL EXAMINATION

To eliminate costly doctor fees, etc., we have eliminated Medical Examination. All people from age 1 to 65, in good health may be included in this new type Guarantee Reserve family policy. No membership fees, no examination fees, no *policy* fee . . . $1.00 a month pays for one policy that insures all.

RUSH—MAIL AT ONCE—DON'T DELAY

Guarantee Reserve LIFE INSURANCE CO.
GUARANTEE RESERVE BLDG., Dept. 17-B, Hammond Ind.

Gentlemen: Without obligation, please send me at once complete information on how to get your Family Life Policy for FREE inspection.

Name.....

Address.....

City.....*State*.....